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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Crooked Timber and the Broken Branch: The Invisible Hand in the Marketplace of Ideas

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Peter Beattie

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Shawn Rosenberg, Chair  
Professor Peter Ditto  
Associate Professor Michael Tesler

2017



## DEDICATION

To

Too many people to list

But especially to the next generation

*"...very wise men, perhaps quite worthy to govern, have written in France, Spain and England on the administration of states. Their books have done much good: not that it corrected the ministers who were in office when the book appeared, for a minister does not and cannot correct himself. He has reached his full status. No more instruction, no more advice. He has not the time to listen to them, the tide of business carries him away. But these good books form the young men destined for office, they form the princes, and the second generation is educated."*

- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "States, governments: which is the best?"

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# CURRICULUM VITAE

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“A Test of the ‘News Diversity’ Standard: Single Frames, Multiple Frames, and Values Regarding the Ukraine Conflict,” (with Jovan Milojevich) *International Journal of Press/Politics* 22(1): 3-22 (2017).

“Anti-Semitism and Opposition to Israeli Government Policies: The Roles of Prejudice and Information” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* doi: /10.1080/01419870.2016.1260751 (2016).

“Theory, Media, and Democracy for Realists,” *Critical Review* (In Press).

“Review Essay: The Battle Over Human Nature, Coming to a Resolution,” *Political Psychology* 37(1): 137-143 (2016).

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“The (Intellectual Property Law &) Economics of Innocent Fraud: The IP & Development Debate,” *International Review of Intellectual Property & Competition Law* 38: 6-30 (2007).

“The U.S., Impunity Agreements, and the International Criminal Court: Towards the Trial of a Future Henry Kissinger,” *Guild Practitioner* 62: 193-229 (2005).



## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Crooked Timber and the Broken Branch: The Invisible Hand in the Marketplace of Ideas

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Shawn Rosenberg, Chair

In our current marketplace of ideas, the invisible hand is not facilitating democracy by spreading knowledge and diverse perspectives to produce an informed citizenry. Instead, the invisible hand is acting as a puppeteer, manipulating voters and exploiting psychological prejudices in ways that often benefit only a small elite, or populist demagogues. And because this invisible hand emerges naturally from a combination of psychological, political, and economic pressures, without a conspiratorial cabal or Head Propagandist, it manipulates in a way that North Korea could only dream of, and China is presently trying to emulate. But this undemocratic state of affairs is unnecessary: science and real-world experience show how we can repair the invisible hand in the marketplace of ideas by reforming the media system, allowing democracy to function and flourish.

## INTRODUCTION

### Why Democracy Is Not Working

*"What kind of truth is this which is true on one side of a mountain and false on the other?"*

- Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

The planes struck the towers while I was in the shower – information about the attack could not enter my bathroom. A friend and roommate happened to be downtown taking photos at the time, so he received information about what would later be called “9/11” in the rudest, most direct way imaginable: his naked eyes absorbed the light reflecting off of dozens of people trapped in the towers, who chose the brief terror and quick end of jumping to their deaths over the excruciating pain of burning alive. I, on the other hand, was blissfully ignorant for at least an hour. As I walked from Alphabet City to Washington Square, two miles away from the World Trade Center, I missed the relevant information – “change blindness” prevented me from noticing that the Twin Towers were no longer part of the skyline. Even as I witnessed a stream of businesspeople heading north on foot, the information still eluded me. (Those whose proximity to the collapse had covered them in soot were still further downtown.) It was the day of the mayoral primaries, so I interpreted the unusual migration as a trip to the polls. I thought: What a turnout, what a day for democracy!

Information about the attack only reached me once I had arrived in my classroom and I was informed by my fellow students; and then, half of it was false. (Planes had hit the White House! Another attack was on the way!) I tried to call my father, who was in the Financial District for a conference, but the cell phone network was overwhelmed. Instead, I

walked to a friend's apartment near Union Square, where, uncoordinated, several of my friends were converging. There, as most of them walked to a nearby hospital to try to donate blood (they were turned away – there were too many would-be donors), I saw CNN's coverage of what had happened two miles away. For billions of other people, the news media would be their *only* source of information about the event.

I remember the week after 9/11 as a most unusual time. Strangers on the street would actually make eye contact, and daily interactions were gentler, kinder. Strangely, the stress of daily life seemed subdued, not augmented by the recent mass murder. It was as if the toxic smoke from the ruins had produced a soporific effect on the city. Soporific, and pacifying; all of the parks I visited during that week were filled with spontaneous memorials, chalk drawings and posters with one theme so common (to me) at the time that I only found it remarkable later.<sup>1</sup> That theme was peace. I saw calls for resilience, for understanding, to avoid violent retribution, to remember the dead, and to honor them by putting an end to violence: peace.

Not so on television. Watching TV news that week was jarring; it was like entering an alternate universe where mourning and the desire for peace were replaced by rage and the desire for retribution. And fear, pervasive fear. The fear spread by the news media took root across the country, creating a sharp distinction between the way that New York City and the United States as a whole reacted to the attack. (Fear even made its way into my own apartment – a month later, I bought three gas masks for myself and my two

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these have been preserved in: Martha Cooper, *Remembering 9/11* (Brooklyn: Mark Batty Publisher, 2011).

roommates, should a future poison gas attack force us to don them and escape across the Williamsburg Bridge.)

This was my first introduction to the power of the media, my first intimation that there might be a difference between mediated and unmediated reality – and that *mediated* reality might be skewed in some significant way. How else to explain the peaceful reactions I saw at the very scene of the crime, while those far away and unaffected screamed for blood?

But there was another question on everyone’s mind at the time: why do they hate us? The easiest answer, one that could be found with only a remote control, was *freedom*. “They” hate “us” for our freedom. As a college student, I had the time and resources to engage in more effortful searches. (Ironically, I was taking a class on the history of Afghanistan that semester, where I learned that the Afghans’ cultural norm of hospitality would make it unthinkable to turn any guest, including bin Laden, over to an outsider.) The answers I found in books, magazines, community radio, and documentaries were far less pat than freedom-hatred. They were complex, challenging, and above all, discomfiting. They were answers that attacked part of my own identity, the way that I saw myself as a member of a nation devoted to justice and democracy. They were answers – true or false – that never reached more than a small minority of my fellow citizens.

...

But why not? Why did this information reach me, and not everyone? More broadly, why does some information spread nearly everywhere (Mickey Mouse), and other information is rare (bin Laden’s stated reasons for the 9/11 attacks)? Why do different people believe such vastly different things, and why should these beliefs vary along with

geography? How could the 9/11 attackers believe the U.S. to be evil and themselves good, while those born in the U.S. believed the exact opposite? *What kind of truth is this which is true on one side of a mountain and false on the other?*

...

Imagine a boy living in a rural part of the United States a couple of decades ago. His parents are Catholic, and they are raising him in their faith. He goes to a Catholic elementary school, where he attends a religion class a couple of times every week. He believes in one God containing three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although he probably only knows a few dozen by name, he believes in hundreds of saints, people who lived holy lives and then went to paradise to live forever as disembodied spirits. He prays to these saints, hoping that they can help him with various aspects of life: Saint Anthony whenever he has lost something, or Mary “Queen of the Highways” when he is riding in a car and wants to avoid accidents. He believes that Jesus gave Saint Peter the authority to head a church, and that God would see to it that Peter and all of his successor-popes would never make a mistake when teaching people about the only true religion in the world. His system of belief seems perfectly self-contained: of course there must be a God – how else to explain the existence of everything? It must have been created. If so, then what was the point of God’s creation? Unless we are merely “spinning like slow tops in a gratuitous universe,” as Mario Vargas Llosa put it, then there must be a divine plan. And unless this God is a prankster or simply absentminded, this plan must have been revealed. And so it was: first to the Jewish people, and then after God the Father sent his Son to redeem His sinful creation, to all people through the Gospel. Since the Gospel states that Jesus handed

the reins over to Peter, then he could be sure that whatever the Catholic Church officially stated was God's honest truth.

One day, this boy looks through his parents' bookshelf, and happens upon a book of essays by a conservative Catholic priest. They are engaging, polemical, and artfully written – so much more entertaining than the textbooks he is accustomed to. Through this book, he learns that Satan has been trying to destroy God's one true Church, by trying to convince people that women should be allowed to become priests. This, he learns, is profoundly evil, because God made it clear in the Gospel and through His popes that the priesthood is supposed to be exclusively male. The people arguing for women priests are caught in a web of delusion, a broad web spun by the devil; a web including all sorts of liberal, leftwing ideas including communism and something called "liberation theology." While these ideas *seem* good and even moral, this is merely the result of a satanic smokescreen. God's ideas, the ideas He gave to his Church, are truly good; and if everyone lived their lives according to God's ideas, everyone would be as happy as possible in this life, and enjoy an eternity of happiness in the next.

This book, *Women Priests and Other Fantasies*, the boy finds electrifying. It deals with universal ideals, and a grand, unified view of human history. The book promises a trustworthy roadmap to make the world a paradise; but more importantly, to ensure that everyone's next life is in paradise. Because there is not only paradise beyond death: there is also an eternal life of torture and torment, for those who do not believe in the correct ideas, or follow the correct rules.

He begins to read other, similar books and magazines, all from a conservative Catholic perspective. He learns that the United States' military should have never stopped

fighting the Vietnamese; clearly since communism is Satan's creation, no amount of spilled blood would ever have been too much in fighting against it. He learns that not only is there a Hell, a place of unimaginable suffering, but a Purgatory. This is a place similar to Hell in its tortures and pains, but from which people eventually leave and go to Heaven. And there is also the Apocalypse – a terrifying prophecy. The Bible describes it as an event as thrilling as the best horror movie: there are massive wars, natural disasters, Satan in the flesh wreaking havoc on earth, and finally, God coming down from Heaven to destroy the devil, end the world, and separate those who will enjoy an eternity in paradise from those who will suffer infinite pain. *Infinite* pain – it is literally inconceivable. This is a fate so terrible, that the boy realizes he should do everything in his power to save people from it.

Besides what is in the Bible, the boy discovers that many saints have seen visions from God that describe other fantastical events. There is the Three Days of Darkness: before the Apocalypse, the whole earth will be plunged into darkness, and demons will run free across the planet. These demons will initiate a last-ditch effort to bring as many people into Hell with them as possible, to share in the demons' eternal suffering. There will be hurricanes of fire, earthquakes, and all manner of death and destruction in the darkness – the only safe place will be indoors. All of the demons of Hell will be trying to lure people outdoors, since those who leave the safety of their homes will immediately die. They will appear at people's doors and windows in the form of friends and family, begging to be let inside. But as soon as one looks out a window or answers a door, one's body will be struck dead and one's soul will go to eternal torment (or, with luck, paradise). The boy mentally prepares himself for the Three Days of Darkness, remembering to stay locked indoors with

windows covered, ignoring any pleas for help coming from outside, praying with his eyes closed to survive long enough to make it to eternal Paradise.

The boy collects small pictures of saints and God, placing them on the wall around his bed. He imagines that during the Apocalypse or the Three Days of Darkness, they will emanate a holy light with the power to protect him from marauding demons. He begins to worry on a daily basis that at any time, he may be the victim of a divine sort of “extraordinary rendition”: kidnapped out of the blue and sent to be tortured. Only this “kidnapping” would be a sudden, unexpected death, like in a car crash; and the torture would not be temporary in a foreign prison, but would be eternal. It would be the most excruciating pain imaginable, and then some; and it would last for more than an entire lifetime, it would never end. Furthermore, not only is *he* subject to such a horrible potential fate, but every human being on the planet is as well. Hence he must pray often, at the very least an hour a day, and offer all of the suffering in his life to God so that He can use it to save people from this ghastly fate.

Through a favorite uncle, the boy is introduced to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show, and the world of politics is laid out before him. This too he finds fascinating, a parallel battlefield for souls where the primary evil to be fought is the mass murder of babies, abortion, and the deluded liberals who cruelly support it. Between conservative Catholic publications like *The Wanderer* and *First Things*, plus *National Review* and Rush Limbaugh’s radio and TV shows, the boy develops a satisfying understanding of the world, and forms a clear picture of it in his head. His worldview is accurate, complete, unassailable. Or so it seemed.

...



If this worldview seems a bit absurd, well, it is. But it is true – or was, for me. I was that young boy, and these were all things I sincerely believed. More than that, *this was the world I inhabited*. These ideas were not merely items in a mental filing cabinet, colorless bits of information – they were *felt*, they made up the lens through which I viewed the world and lived life.

Thankfully, I encountered new ideas – another story altogether – which due to their seeming veracity yet incommensurability with my worldview, began to place cracks in its foundations. These inassimilable ideas made it clear that the self-contained system, with its flawless logical rigor, rested on illogical foundations. And this was impermissible within the system itself: according to the First Vatican Council, “between faith and reason no true dissension can ever exist, since the same God, who reveals mysteries and infuses faith, has bestowed on the human soul the light of reason; moreover, God cannot deny Himself, nor ever contradict truth with truth.”

Hence, the system had to go. To borrow from James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, did I then become a Protestant? No – I had lost faith, not self-respect. “What kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity that is logical and coherent and to embrace one that is illogical and incoherent?”<sup>2</sup> I had, instead, to start anew.

...

I share this story for two reasons.<sup>3</sup> First, to introduce what started to motivate me to research and write this book. But second, to make you, the reader, more comfortable. After

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<sup>2</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1922): 287.

<sup>3</sup> Possibly three. As Jeffrey Friedman argues, for political psychology as much as political epistemology to be able to explain political behavior, it must explain political beliefs, which requires engaging in a sort of intellectual biography:

One might object that by the principle of sufficient reason, one’s belief that a given reason is decisive must itself have a cause. This is true enough and is a crucial point for political

all, this book may challenge some of what you believe – and as I well know as a devout believer, when one’s beliefs are challenged, it can feel like one’s own self and self-worth are being threatened. So rest easy: this book was written by someone who was taken in by some quite crazy ideas. So who am I to say that the ideas I am sharing in this book are any less untethered?

That being said, having my entire worldview shaken to the core, and realizing that I needed to construct an entirely new replacement, made me look at ideas in an entirely new light. What are ideas, anyway? Most fundamentally, they are information. Ideas are bits of information that are generated in human minds, mutate, combine, recombine, change, and spread from person to person. One’s beliefs are simply ideas, oftentimes simply ideas that one was taught as a child, when we were eagerly soaking them up like water to a sponge. The mind may be mysterious, but it is not magical: it cannot survey all ideas in existence, or all ideas that might possibly exist, and choose the best among them. The mind can only embrace ideas it is exposed to by others, or create new ideas from bits and pieces of other ideas it has been exposed to. Gore Vidal once put it that Montaigne wrote “about what he had been reading *which became himself*.”<sup>4</sup> Who we are – our identities and beliefs – is in

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epistemologists to keep in mind. The conclusion to which it leads is that we should attribute actions to beliefs that can, in turn, be explained by other beliefs that, in their turn, are explained by still other beliefs, indefinitely. If we want to know why an agent thought a certain action advisable in a particular situation, then, we should try to investigate her web of beliefs at that time; and if we want to explain why this web was in place at that time, we should try to investigate the agent’s intellectual history, which will (in part) involve beliefs persuasively communicated to the agent by others, who in turn were influenced by the beliefs of others, and so on. In following this complicated causal chain we do our best to locate the ideational factors that eventually led to the belief that the agent should take action A<sub>1</sub>. ... Intellectual biography, or the history of particular agents’ beliefs, would therefore be a model for a social science that satisfies the principle of sufficient reason. Such a social science would be scientific because in place of any uncaused causes, it would put beliefs as the cause of intentional actions and persuasion as the cause of beliefs. (Friedman, forthcoming, 128)

<sup>4</sup> Gore Vidal, *United States: Essays: 1952-1992* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001): 510, emphasis added. What Montaigne read became himself; and Michel Eyquem *became* what was the name of the estate his parents owned: Montaigne.

large part the result of the information we absorbed from our environments, including books. Hence the distribution of the world's religions: Catholics are disproportionately those whose parents were Catholics, Hindus are disproportionately those who were raised Hindu, and so on with Muslims, Buddhists, and the rest. (If God wrote the principles of the one true faith in every person's heart, these have been translated in radically different ways around the globe.) Look at a map of the distribution of the world's religions, and you see that beliefs, like languages, move along with peoples. They seem more like cultural artifacts, and less like the product of magical souls that can create and adhere to *any* idea through sheer will.

But these are religious ideas, and skeptics have long noted the implausibility of a universal, omnipotent God revealing the one true faith to only a few people in one small geographical area on Earth. Voltaire may have said it best:

What a pity that there are sects which go from town to town retailing their fantasies like charlatans who sell their drugs! What a disgrace for the human mind that small nations think that only they have a right to the truth, and that the vast empire of China is given up to error! Could the eternal being merely be the god of the island of Formosa or the island of Borneo? Would he abandon the rest of the universe? ... Woe betide the people so stupid and so barbarous as to think that there is a god for its province alone! That is a blasphemy. What! the light of the sun illuminates all eyes, and we are to believe that the light of god illuminates only a small and puny nation in a corner of the globe! What a horror, and what a stupidity!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin Books, 1972): 89, 94.

With what sort of certainty should we hold other ideas? It is not only religious ideas that we hold for reasons of geographical accident. The place we were raised also largely determines the political ideas we are exposed to, and which ideas we are likely to hold. There are few French nationalists among those born and raised in Ethiopia, just as there are few monarchists who were born and raised in the United States. Our political ideas, like our religious ideas, are powerfully influenced by mere geography.

So why do we believe what we believe about politics? Certainly, our parents are a primary influence; so too our schools, churches, and circles of friends. And, finally: the books and newspapers we read, the news shows we watch, and the internet sites we visit. These are the sources of the political ideas available to us, whether or not we adopt them as our own. Outside of these sources, what do we have? We are as likely to adopt political ideas to which we are not exposed, as a child born to religious Muslim parents in Medina is to become a devotee of Shinto.

Then, can we hold to political beliefs only as strongly as we are entitled to hold to religious beliefs, what with their liability as being to a large extent a product of geographical accident? Not so fast; one key distinction is that political ideas have spread much further and more indiscriminately. The idea of democracy as the most legitimate form of government has spread to near-saturation throughout the world. Even where the implementation of the idea is far from *ideal*, homage is paid to its power: witness the *Democratic People's Republic* of Korea. The nearly-universal spread of the idea of democracy is a powerful testament to its compatibility with whatever human nature is; quite unlike the smorgasbord of religions claiming to be the creation of the creator of human beings.

But what about political ideas that are not grand political philosophies spread to saturation? What of small-scale, retail ideas with some political aspect or importance? These deserve greater suspicion. Search your memory for all the information it contains about North Korea, for instance. These are all ideas with a political aspect, having political importance: they inform your political position on that country. If the information you have about North Korea is uniformly negative – a corrupt, totalitarian government that rules by fear, forces its workers to produce weapons rather than feed its starving population, and unjustly imprisons and tortures scores of its people whose only crime is their desire to leave – then your political position will likely be to support political candidates taking a harsh line in dealings with the DPRK government (insofar as this one issue is concerned). If the information you have about North Korea is more nuanced – that it is a harsh, brutal government, but one that has witnessed its entire country being bombed “to the Stone Age” by hostile foreign powers, thereby explaining its paranoid character – then your political position will likely be correspondingly nuanced. You may be more likely to support political candidates taking a more conciliatory position towards the DPRK government (again, insofar as this one issue is concerned). Or, if the information you have about North Korea is uniformly positive (highly unlikely for anyone raised outside of North Korea) – that it is a workers’ paradise, ruled by the most able and intelligent man in the world, constantly under threat from evil imperialists seeking to destroy it – then your political position will be quite different. It all comes down to the information you have.

Which brings us to the news media, the ultimate and predominant source for most of the information that comprises our political views. The news media provides the vast majority of us with nearly all the information we have about the world outside of our

immediate social circles. Whether that information is worthy of our trust depends on the nature of the media system we have access to. Citizens of North Korea would be wise to distrust much of the information coming from their media system, while citizens of the United States can be confident that a far greater percentage of the information from their media system is trustworthy. After all, the U.S. government does not actively censor the U.S. press, and U.S. journalists are trained to be as objective as possible. Yet even here, there are reasons for doubt. There need not be a conscious, coordinated policy *à la* North Korea for a media system to display a strangely propagandistic character. Unconscious or unintentional mechanisms abound: political-economic pressures, ideological uniformity among the owners of media companies or journalists themselves, and a reliance on government sources for information are all possible candidates. Even “culture” is a candidate: norms, routines, common sense, conventional wisdom, and what “it just wouldn’t do to say” or write. Hence even in media systems that are relatively free and open, a healthy skepticism is required.

These sorts of unconscious mechanisms capable of producing bias that eerily mimics self-conscious propaganda are not a Cold War anachronism. They were in operation in quite recent memory. Before and during the second U.S. war on Iraq, the U.S. public largely believed the war to be justified on account of Iraq posing a mortal threat. The weight of publicly available (*available*, not necessarily common) evidence, however, was that the Iraqi government was a threat to no one other than its own people. And so it was that the vast majority of the world’s people outside of the United States believed that the war was unjustified – yet the majority of the U.S. public supported the war. How was this so? Simply put, the U.S. media was far more accepting of the U.S. government’s position

than were the media systems of the rest of the world. The direct result: the U.S. public believed in lies, and most of the rest of the world did not.<sup>6</sup> What was true on our side of the Pacific and Atlantic was false on the other sides – and, as now recognized by even Republican candidates for president in 2016, our “truth” was false in reality.

Such a level of dependence on the news media strikes us as an unpleasant thought. It is, frankly, embarrassing. It makes it seem as though we are automatons manipulated by an all-powerful media. (Which, by the way, makes a fine straw man to argue against). It challenges what is much more comfortable and reassuring to believe: that we choose what to believe for ourselves, and that we are perfectly free to accept or reject whatever we see or hear.

And so we are. We have that freedom – we are *not* automatons fated to be perfectly manipulated by an omnipotent media. But we are *not* free to accept or reject ideas we never see or hear. And herein lays the power of the news media: choosing just what it is that we will be able to accept or reject.

...

A commonsense rebuttal to claims about a powerful media is that there is no evidence of any conspiratorial cabal using the media as its puppet to mislead the public;<sup>7</sup> but that there is plenty of evidence showing instead that the U.S. media (among other countries’ media) is composed of fair-minded professional journalists who are free to write and say what they like; that they are often quite adversarial toward government and

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<sup>6</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky et al. "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict: From Iraq and the ‘War on Terror’ to Future Threats to Peace," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013): 489.

<sup>7</sup> This first point is true on its face: I, at least, am not aware of any evidence of a conspiratorial cabal controlling the media. For such a thing to even be possible, psychologically, would essentially require all of the ringleaders to be psychopaths with an admirable capacity to keep secrets; furthermore, all of their subordinates would have to be naïve or uniformly, uninterruptedly cowed into silence.

corporations, and tend toward the liberal side of the U.S. political spectrum; and that the U.S. is an open society without censorship, in which citizens are free to read, watch, say, or believe anything they like – therefore, those concerned about media power are likely to be adherents of ideological persuasions outside of the mainstream, upset that their ideology has failed to gain wider acceptance.<sup>8</sup> Each of these points of rebuttal is, I believe, quite correct. Only, they are correct in themselves, but do not constitute a rebuttal. This book will explain why.

It explains how an “invisible hand” creates a *de facto* propaganda system within the American marketplace of ideas. A conspiracy is entirely unnecessary to explain the constricted supply of information within our open society: psychological, commercial, and political pressures suffice to produce censorship and propaganda in our otherwise-free media system. As Adam Smith might have put it: “It is not from the malevolence of the politician, the journalist, the media owner, or the audience that a propaganda system is created, but from their regard to their own interests – and, from their evolved psychology.” This book will argue that the news media has a power great enough to rival any branch of government. To be in any serious sense consistent with democracy, the power of media, like the power of government, must be submitted to democratic control – and not merely to the polyarchic plutocracy of the marketplace. Otherwise, we must openly admit that our political system is a sham democracy disguising an oligarchy. Or, simply that ours is a democracy that is not working.

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<sup>8</sup> This last point is almost necessarily true. One must first know of the *existence* of something before noticing its present absence. Those within the U.S. ideological mainstream, liberals and conservatives, can and have noted media *bias* in favor of the other, but it may take someone who has read widely in excluded – libertarian, fascist, socialist, or anarchist – thought to develop a felt *concern* for the power of the media.



Explanations for this sorry state of affairs can be grouped into two broad categories. On the Right, the idea is that human nature is profoundly flawed: “out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made,” according to Kant. Our ideal forms of government cannot help but fall short of their goals, because human nature is corrupt, selfish, and to some extent, even evil. Hence democracy, which Churchill called “the worst form of government, except for all those other forms,” is failing out of necessity. Our fallen nature can do no better, though it could certainly do worse.

On the Left, the idea is that democracy fails only when impeded by external forces. Human nature is perfectly suited to self-government, and would produce wonderful results if allowed time to flourish under true democracy. The Left’s diagnosis for the present democratic deficit is the impediment imposed by wealthy individuals and corporations. These oligarchs have captured democratic governments, and use the news media to confuse the public and prevent state power from being used *by* and *for* the people. Instead of offering a diverse and representative array of perspectives, opinions, and arguments, the media overwhelmingly presents only those perspectives, opinions, and arguments that support the status quo. This, not any failings of human nature, is what is preventing democracy from achieving its potential.

Science can help us decide between these two conflicting visions. Scientists studying evolutionary and social psychology have shown that we are animals that evolved to cooperate with members of our own groups and to compete with other groups. Our brains are designed with biases and prejudices to facilitate *this* sort of cooperation and competition – *not* to think with the rationality and objectivity of philosophers. We now know that humanity is indeed crooked timber: far from the Liberal ideal of rationality held

sacred by the classical proponents of democracy, *Homo sapiens* has an evolved mind riddled with biases that skew our perceptions and profoundly affect our political thinking. But while our nature seems fallen by comparison with an imagined, Edenic ideal, it does not warrant the Right's pessimism any more than the Left's optimism. Our nature is Janus-faced: we have a competitive, selfish heritage from our distant simian forebears, and a cooperative, group-focused heritage that emerged when our lineage diverged from that of chimpanzees. What separates our species from our closest relatives is our impressive ability to cooperate; but at the same time, we still share much of their selfish and competitive instincts.

The explanation will piece together the results of scientific studies to arrive at an understanding of how the media exerts<sup>9</sup> political power. Unlike in the realm of law, where successful arguments are built upon persuasive reasoning and the accumulated authority of judges and legislators, scientific study is constrained only by what we can all observe. When a chemist says that two chemicals produce a given effect when combined, we are not constrained to believe this on the strength of the chemist's authority; we are invited to combine the same two chemicals, and see for ourselves. Hence the motto of England's Royal Society of scientists: *nullius in verba*, "nothing in words" or "take no one's word for

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<sup>9</sup> Due either to the poverty of the English language itself or my impoverished ability to use it with unfailing accuracy, much of the discussion in this book will use words that imply intentionality to describe mindless processes, or aggregate outcomes of many conscious (and unconscious) choices none of which individually *intended* to produce the aggregate outcome. For instance, evolutionary "selection" – clearly, there is no actor, Nature, that consciously *selects* some traits or populations for survival and others for extinction. This is a problem that may lead to misinterpretation, as when Richard Dawkins' use of the word "selfish" to describe how mindless bits of DNA replicate led many readers to erroneously infer that our genes evolved to produce selfish individual organisms. Nowhere in this book, however, is language that often *implies* intentionality actually *meant* to suggest that conscious intent is in any way involved outside of human consciousness.

On a less important note, I most commonly use the Latin loan word "media" in the singular, although in its original Latin it is plural. "The media" is meant to refer to the modern means of mass communication: newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet.

it.” Not all science is as simple as chemistry, however; more complicated areas of study, like human societies, do not allow for pure experiments. There are always extraneous, uncontrolled factors in even the most careful social psychological experiment. And many social questions do not allow for *any* experimentation, in which case the term “science” refers to its older, broader definition: a systematic study that creates knowledge used to explain or predict aspects of the world. Regardless, as much for chemistry as for sociology: how we *interpret* science, and what our interpretations tell us about how we might better organize ourselves socially, politically, or economically – this is a matter for open debate. I mean to build here only a *prima facie* case for the power of media in politics, using the findings of many scientists from several fields. Though I have not yet encountered one, a counterargument could be made that uses or reinterprets the same findings, along with others, and weaves them into an opposing narrative that more satisfyingly explains the whole. (I, for one, would welcome such a counterargument, especially if it provides reassurance that democracy, in a form substantially faithful to its ideal of citizens sharing equally in political power, presently exists in the United States.)

To make this argument, first a theory of information in society – ideas, beliefs – is needed. The first chapter explores three such theories: meme theory, which ties *social* information to broader conceptions of information at the root of physical existence and the evolutionary process; schema theory, which conceptualizes the way that the human brain absorbs, processes, and stores information; and social representations theory, which explains and explores the way that large chunks of socially-shared information disseminate through a population. These three approaches cover three ascending levels, from the individual bit of information, to the information within an individual brain, to the sets of

information widely shared within a society. Combining the three together, the resulting approach views ideas as bits of information that evolve and spread – much like genes, biological organisms, and species – according to selection pressures of various sorts: psychological, cultural, political, and economic.

The first chapter explains why this perspective is a reasonable one, and what explanatory benefits it has for an understanding of politics. While it illuminates much about the realm of ideas, it cannot on its own provide predictions or even full explanations of why some ideas spread widely throughout our species or just within one particular country, and other ideas do not. This theoretical approach can only sketch out the complex system that is the world of ideas or the ecology of information, and identify the various forces affecting the evolution of ideas, particularly political ideas. It sets up the basic structure and identifies the actors,<sup>10</sup> or the forces involved. But to understand the evolutionary system overall, it is necessary to investigate the main forces in operation *within* the ecology of information. (Similarly, even with a perfect understanding of genetics, epigenetics, and embryology, we would know little about any given animal or organism without delving into particulars of their environment, and their place in the overall ecology of which they are a part.)

Borrowing from economics, the forces at play within the evolution of political ideas can be divided into two classes: demand and supply. “Demand” forces would include everything about the human brain that makes some ideas more likely than others to be absorbed or accepted, retained and retransmitted. For example, memory would be a demand force or a demand bias: *ceteris paribus*, a small amount of information is more

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<sup>10</sup> Again, “actors” without *intentionality*.

likely to spread than a large amount of information. (Accordingly, the understanding of a “meme” as an entertaining picture-and-joke on the internet has spread more widely than the theory of the meme as the basic unit of the evolutionary algorithm as applied to the realm of ideas.) “Supply” forces would include any influence making some ideas rather than others more likely to be disseminated by the biggest supplier of political information, the media, hence becoming part of the most accessible supply of political ideas. For example, libel laws are a supply force or a supply bias: *ceteris paribus*, information that carries the risk of a libel lawsuit is less likely to be disseminated in the media than information carrying no such risk.

In order to understand demand biases, we first need to understand the human mind, how it evolved, and how its evolutionary history affects political cognition today. To understand our psychology today, the second chapter begins with history: the emergence of hominids, through the point when our species branched off from our hominid cousins 100-200 thousand years ago, to our development of sedentary agriculture and large civilizations ten thousand years ago, and beyond. This chapter describes the marks this evolutionary history has left on our psychology, including our capacity for morality and political thinking. One of the most striking anomalies of human evolution was the emergence of large-scale cooperation or eusociality, a phenomenon common in ants and wasps but few other species. To produce this anomaly, unique ecological conditions were required, and several psychological capacities had to develop. Once in place, these evolved psychological capacities produced their own ecology, an ecology of human minds in which information as ideas, practices, technologies, languages, religions, and more could evolve. These two distinct but interlinked evolutionary systems – the biological and the

informational or ideational – have together produced everything that makes us human. This includes political ideologies: gene-culture co-evolution has produced genetic predispositions – weak though they may be on their own – that make some inclined toward leftwing ideas and others to rightwing ideas. In other words, our genes help to produce a *psychological* Left and Right, or “elective affinities” toward certain ideas and away from others. In this way, our evolutionary history lives on in the design of our minds, producing an “evolutionarily stable strategy” allowing some ideas, practices, institutions to persist (the psychological Right), while providing a laboratory of innovation for potential improvements (the psychological Left).

The third chapter examines demand biases more directly, by exploring what the field of social psychology can tell us about our evolved psychology on matters of social and political importance. Today’s globally-dominant political philosophy is liberalism, which was born before evolutionary theory and psychology; and liberalism’s view of human capacities looks naïve today in light of the former.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the liberal assumption of human rationality, our psychology is ridden with irrational biases that skew our thinking and interfere with an ideally-rational way of learning and thinking about the political world. This chapter focuses on biases that are likely to affect the way we construct and fashion our political worldviews from the information about the outside world we receive from the media: from in-group bias and unconscious cognition to groupthink and the system justification tendency. Even if our media systems were designed to offer a perfectly objective and bias-free *supply* of political information from diverse perspectives, these

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<sup>11</sup> Though some liberal political philosophers are beginning to grapple with how to incorporate findings from psychology; for instance, see Olivia Newman, *Liberalism in Practice: The Psychology and Pedagogy of Public Reason* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015).

demand-side biases may nonetheless distort the way information from the news media is received, processed, and remembered. Hence a democracy-appropriate media system must offer a supply of information designed to cancel out our social-psychological biases.

Arriving directly at the question of media power, the fourth chapter surveys what we have discovered about the way information moves from the news media into our minds. The conventional wisdom for decades in social science was that the media produces only minimal effects on opinions. But if the theoretical approach laid out in the first chapter is correct, this cannot be so: information is physical, and it must be transported from where it originates in political events, legislation, and research before it can reach our minds. As such, and given that the news media provides the lion's share of logistics for the transportation of political information, the media's effects simply cannot be minimal. The overwhelming weight of recent research demonstrates precisely this: that the media has pervasive effects on political opinions and understandings. From advertising to entertainment programming to the news, the media produces significant effects on what we believe about the wider world. It can persuade, prime, frame, set the political agenda, and shape our political opinions. It can facilitate or impede spirals of silence, ideological segregation and polarization, and the acquisition of political knowledge. While the media is far from an "influencing machine" that can brainwash or a hypodermic needle capable of injecting ideas into our minds, it nonetheless is the single greatest influence on public opinion, as it is the conduit through which the building blocks of public opinion are transmitted. Therefore, biases in the *supply* of information provided by the media are exceedingly likely to translate into biases in our political knowledge, from which we construct our understanding of the political world and act in it.

Whereas the second and third chapters examine the “demand side” of political information, the fifth chapter examines the “supply side.” That is, it investigates the political economy of media: all the factors by which some information is included in, and other information is excluded from, the supply offered us by the news media. Regardless of whether we are perfectly rational or systematically biased processors of information, what determines the *supply* of information to which we are exposed can powerfully affect the understandings we end up with. Beginning with a short history of the media and how it developed into the form we have today, this chapter discusses how far the contemporary media system is from playing the structural role it meant to in democratic theory. While the media is ideally supposed to provide a free “marketplace of ideas” or an open public sphere, a host of political and economic forces currently frustrate the attainment of that ideal. These forces include ownership concentration, an economic process of creative destruction currently light on creation, ideological bias, commercial and political pressures, and cultural and institutional influences. In combination, these supply-side biases produce a media system that not only fails to counteract our evolved psychological biases, but compounds them.

If the United States were the only country in the world, we could draw little from an examination of the political economy of its media system. It would be impossible to tie any deficiency in the supply of political information to negative outcomes like a politically ignorant populous – such outcomes could instead be the unavoidable result of psychological biases and limitations. Thankfully, there are other countries with different sorts of media systems; and comparing outcomes of those systems to those of the U.S. media system can strengthen the causal link between variations in media system and



politically-relevant outcomes. The sixth chapter examines the ways different countries have organized and regulated their media systems, and the features of these different systems. It traces differences between levels of political knowledge across countries to the differences in the way their respective media systems have been structured, particularly regarding their degree of commercialization and level of investment in public service media. Comparing different media systems reveals clear patterns of how different structures produce different outcomes, including levels of political knowledge and participation. These comparisons suggest reforms to contemporary media systems to make them better live up to the ideal role they should play in a democracy: providing a free, fair, and open marketplace of ideas.

Finally, the conclusion analyzes the current state of democracy in the United States (primarily), and how deficiencies in its media system have translated into deficiencies in political practice. The educational system is another key component of the ecology of information, also partially responsible for deficiencies in political practice – while it would require a separate book to address fully, its contribution will be briefly discussed here. The focus, however, remains on the predominant provider of political information, the news media, and its relationship to democracy. Similar to what people have often said about communism, democracy is a wonderful theory – but in practice it is doomed to failure without a well-functioning media system.

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The question of the media is of the utmost political importance. The news media is our lifeline to participation in the political realm; it is the mail from the outside we receive while in prison; it is the telescope through which learn about our place in the universe; it is

the microscope through which we learn what we are made of. A network of salons, coffee shops, and a community of the literate comprised the first public sphere, which provided the impetus and the foundation for the rise of liberal democracies. Today, the public sphere has enlarged and diversified along with the franchise, and the modern mass media is its primary constituent. Dire social problems can be easily solved in a dictatorship, so long as the dictator is benevolent, well informed, and has the power to enforce policies. In a democracy, however, a majority of voters must be knowledgeable – or else dire problems can go unaddressed or even intensified, to the detriment (or worse) of all. Yet Larry Bartels observes that “[t]he political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best-documented features of contemporary politics...”<sup>12</sup> The invisible hand in our present, distorted marketplace of ideas is not working. To produce a knowledgeable citizenry, clearly a media system different from that of the United States is required.

Data scientist Alex Pentland writes about organizations what could just as well be said of political polities:

I think of [polities] as a group of people sailing in a stream of ideas. Sometimes they are sailing in swift, clear streams where the ideas are abundant, but sometimes they are in stagnant pools or terrifying whirlpools. At other times, one person’s idea stream forks off, splitting them apart from other people and taking them in a new direction. To me, this is the real story of community and culture. The rest is just surface appearance and illusion.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Larry M. Bartels, "Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* (1996): 194.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Pentland, *Social Physics: How Good Ideas Spread – The Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2014): 44.

In this metaphor, the news media would be a system of levees and canals preventing overwhelming floods of information from tossing the polity about in chaotic torrents, and channeling tractable, useful flows of information so our sailor-citizens can navigate the political realm. In the United States today, the levees are broken, and torrents of information carry a majority of the population so far from the political realm, into the stagnant pools of vapid entertainment, that they know nothing of politics; and the canals are rife with broken locks, preventing those citizens who do venture into the political realm from exploring its entirety.

As members of *Homo sapiens*, we all collectively face several dire political problems that may, if unaddressed, prove fatal on a species-wide scale. There are enough nuclear weapons on the planet to destroy most forms of life, and their use remains just one serious provocation or mere accident away. Non-nuclear warfare's threat is not as total, yet one is hard pressed to find a war anywhere in the world today that is not a fundamentally senseless loss of life and cause of unjustifiable suffering – from a scientific perspective, wars result from irrational in-group bias and other psychological deficiencies (or “suboptimalities,” like myopic greed or lust for power), and could be solved through international pressure to forge compromises. The way we organize ourselves economically is such that tens of thousands of people die every day due to simple lack of food, a mere distributional problem that nonetheless claims more lives in a day than terrorism does in a year. Meanwhile, even in those limited geographical areas favored by the global distribution system, where food grows on pace with asset prices and disparities between rich and poor, despair abounds with suffocating poverty amidst unprecedented wealth.

And then there is perhaps the greatest threat of all, climate change, jeopardizing the very lucky condition in which our species first encountered the world by threatening to set off feedback loops making our planet uninhabitable. Even without any significant expertise in climate science, one cannot help but be impressed by the accumulated evidence and overwhelming scientific consensus. One has every right to be skeptical about any scientific theory, no matter how well supported; but serious criticism can only be made by using the scientific method itself, proposing an alternate theory with even better evidentiary support. Even taking climate science from a perspective more skeptical than certain, the principle of precaution would urge us to take immediate steps to avoid even a *potential* harm of such magnitude. Yet, we do nothing, or what amounts to nothing. As time goes by, the predictions made by climate scientists come to seem less alarmist, and more conservative – too conservative, as we only seem to be quickening the process by which the planet becomes inhospitable, and *Homo sapiens* flirts with extinction.

Information, particularly a lack of information, lies at the heart of all of these problems. These problems are not information “all the way down” – they are more than merely a lack of information, there are resource constraints and psychological biases in play as well. Yet, their solutions *could* all be based fundamentally on information. With fuller information on the nature and scope of climate change, along with proposed solutions, voters *could* make immediate action on climate change a prerequisite for holding political office. With fuller information on the global economy and what we know about the way it works, along with proposed reforms, voters *could* make status quo policies taboo, and put a quick end to the career of any politician without a serious reform proposal. Whether they *would* is another question; perhaps they would instead find criticisms of the

proposed solutions more persuasive, accepting the belief that such proposals would only make things worse. Perhaps. But without mere *knowledge* of the proposals, they *cannot* do either. Without awareness of options, choice is impossible.

And for war also, information can be prophylactic. For as long as Europeans have been known as Europeans, they have been slaughtering each other (and non-Europeans) with regularity – the only thing changing over time being the justifications and the weaponry. Arguably, they have recently become civilized: witness over a half century of relative peace after their unsurpassed orgy of barbarity in World War II. And no explanation of *why* Europeans have not relapsed into mass, mutual slaughter could be complete without *ideas*. Europeans are better educated now than at any time in their history, and it is very hard for an educated mind to be duped by rationalizations and justifications for risking one’s own life while killing unknown others – all for the greater wealth and power of a few fellow citizens one has never met. Today’s Europeans disdain aggressive nationalism more than ever before, and have adopted pacifism to a reassuring extent.<sup>14</sup> The information contained in enough Europeans’ minds has prevented the outbreak of that to which Europeans had formerly been as enthusiastically attached as they currently are to football: war.

The great Peruvian intellectual Manuel González Prada once wrote:

Only a perverse morality can make us regard as bandits six shirtless men who hang about the outskirts of a city and as heroes six thousand uniformed outlaws who invade the neighboring country’s territory to steal away lives and property. What is

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<sup>14</sup> Raphael S. Cohen and Gabriel M. Scheinmann, "Can Europe Fill the Void in US Military Leadership?" *Orbis* 58, no. 1 (2015): 51-52. "Europeans remain politically united about one thing—pacifism."

bad in the individual we judge to be good in the collectivity, reducing good and evil to a simple question of numbers. The enormity of a crime or vice transforms it into a praiseworthy action or into virtue. We call the robbery of a million “business” and the garroting of entire nations “a glorious deed.” The scaffold for the assassin; apotheosis for the soldier.... When man leaves behind his atavistic ferociousness, war will be remembered as a prehistoric barbarity, and famous and admired warriors of today will figure in the sinister gallery of the devil’s children, by the side of assassins, executioners, and butchers. Napoleon’s skull will be stacked next to that of a gorilla.<sup>15</sup>

Unhappily, there is still quite a lot of museum space in between gorillas and Napoleon, and humanity hangs raggedly on to its atavistic ferociousness. But this is not due to a perverse morality in which small crimes loom large while large crimes are transformed through moral algebra into glorious feats. That is, this flawed morality does not recognize its own perversity: it views large crimes as the unfortunate but only-available means to accomplish great feats. And as the evidence discussed in the second chapter reveals, such a museum placement would be unfair to the gorilla: war is a relatively recent invention, some 10,000 years old, and it is uniquely human. (Or nearly so – we share it in common with ants.)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Manuel González Prada, “Priests, Indians, Soldiers, and Heroes,” in *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Orin Starn et al., 199-206 (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995): 201-202.

<sup>16</sup> Mark W. Moffett, “Ants & the Art of War,” *Scientific American* 305, no. 6 (2011).

While early empires like those of the Romans<sup>17</sup> and the Mongols<sup>18</sup> had ideologies justifying their empires with reference to some divine sanction granted to the emperor or Khaqan, more recent empires have felt the need to excuse great crimes by making them seem to be the only available way to achieve a greater good.<sup>19</sup> Spain's empire in the Americas was as vicious as they come, but its defenders argued that it was of benefit to the Indians, by civilizing them and saving their souls from eternal torment. Britain's blood-soaked empire was also a noble mission to bring the light of civilization to the barbarians of the world; France eagerly adopted its own *mission civilisatrice* as well.<sup>20</sup> Nazi Germany was merely trying to save Europe from contamination by inferior genes, and Imperial Japan was only trying to save Asia from Western imperialism and to create a prosperous East, guided by Japan like a wise father. So too is the United States merely promoting democracy, freedom, and open commerce around the world, for the greater good of humankind. Later empires never seemed to engage in anything other than just, even selfless wars. (As Wyndham Lewis quipped, "[b]ut what war that was ever fought was an 'unjust' war, except of course that waged by the enemy?")<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Vol. 6 (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2000): 19-48. Yet even within the Roman empire, there were stirrings of later justifications for empire; as Cicero wrote, rule over barbarians "is just precisely because servitude in such men is established for their welfare" (Pagden, 1995, 20).

<sup>18</sup> Michal Biran, "The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire," *Medieval Encounters* 10, no. 1-3 (2004): 340-341.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> I was one of the defenders of these empires – one of my high school history textbooks was *Christ the King Lord of History* – and I still see the logic in the religious defense of empire. (Like much of neoclassical economics: the logic is flawless, the assumptions problematic.) On religious-utilitarian grounds, any suffering caused by imperial conquests would be a drop in the ocean next to the suffering avoided by thousands of souls saved from Hell.

<sup>21</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay (Berkeley CA: Gingko Press, 1984): 45.

These imperial examples of the evil humanity is capable of suggest a way that they can be ended prematurely, before they terminate in bloodshed and self-destruction. For why is it that these more recent, post-printing-press empires felt it necessary to take what were fairly simple power grabs at the expense of foreign others, and gussy them up as noble and selfless missions to *help* others? Why bother? Why not simply revel in one's superior power, and rest assured in the maxim that might makes right? But no; such thoughts tend to be restricted to "the closed and hushed councils of power, or in the concealed psychological depths of individual men and women"<sup>22</sup> – but why?

The complete, definitive reason why this is so may never be learned, as it lies buried in millions of years of evolutionary history interacting with thousands of years of intellectual history and social evolution. But what is important is that for whatever reason – the psychological adaptations that first arose to produce large-scale cooperation, and/or institutional and intellectual evolution – naked theft, murder, and exploitation are generally frowned upon by human beings. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "[i]t seems to be a fact of life that human beings cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some thin rationalization to clothe an obvious wrong into beautiful garments of righteousness."<sup>23</sup> But since doing wrong can be *individually* beneficial (or adaptive), this forms a selection pressure for ideas to rationalize and justify predatory behavior; yet in the ecology of the human mind, these rationalizations and justifications are always vulnerable to the predation of contrary, critical ideas. Who today takes any of these empires'

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<sup>22</sup> Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 87.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension," mimeographed transcript taken from taped recording of address given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the James B. Gay Lectures (April 19, 1961): 2.



justificatory pronouncements at face value? Who today does not cringe when reading an imperialist's rationalizations, like this gem from Winston Churchill:

I do not agree that the dog in the manger has the final right to the manger, even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher grade race, a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.<sup>24</sup>

All of the empires mentioned above (but one) eventually fell apart, for a variety of reasons. But one of those reasons surely is that the ideas undergirding those empires failed to gain and retain the consent of sufficient numbers of people – whether from among the rulers or the ruled – to survive. As the Austrian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach put it: “but little evil would be done in the world if evil never could be done in the name of good.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps our increasingly interconnected societies are inching toward such a state where evil-in-the-name-of-good becomes impossible to sell to the masses.

Hence the promise of a well-functioning media, and the marketplace of ideas it needs to support and maintain: through open intellectual competition, harmful ideas stand little chance of surviving for long. While who could disagree with John Stuart Mill that “[i]t is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power denied to error,”<sup>26</sup> I have hope that there is an ever-present selection pressure in the ecology of the human mind for ideas that conduce to a better life for humankind. This is a hope, and

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Arundhati Roy, *War Talk* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2003): 58.

<sup>25</sup> Kuno Francke and Isidore Singer, eds, *The German Classics: Masterpieces of German Literature Translated into English*, Vol. 8 (New York: The German Publication Society, 1914): 435.

<sup>26</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1865): 17.

fundamentally a guess – albeit, an educated guess<sup>27</sup> – but nonetheless, a guess and a hope I choose to have. A desire to avoid human suffering and promote human happiness is not the *only* selection pressure, guaranteeing with the passage of sufficient time a beneficial outcome.<sup>28</sup> Yet it is deep-seated, arising from the suite of adaptations that first created our species. If Antonio Gramsci could write about having pessimism of the intellect, but *optimism of the will* while dying in Mussolini’s prisons, then most of us reading this can afford to be a bit hopeful too.

However, there is certainly ample reason for the intellect’s pessimism. The following chapters provide some additional reasons, at least for any who comfort themselves with soothing myths about how the media and democracy currently work. Yet even the arch-pessimist Harold Bloom ends *The Lucifer Principle*, his iconoclastic romp through the cruelty and misery of human history, with a hope similar to mine: “We must invent a way in which memes and their superorganismic carriers – nations and subcultures – can compete without carnage. We may find a clue to that path in science. A scientific system is one in which small groups of men and women cohere around an idea, then use the powers of persuasion and politics to establish that idea’s dominance in their field, and to drive rival hypotheses – along with those who propound them – to the periphery.”<sup>29</sup> This is precisely the promise of a *functioning*, free marketplace of ideas. Such a possibility may seem distant, and dependent on social action yet to be taken and still over the horizon; but as this book

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Hugo Mercier and Daniel Sperber, “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 34(2) (2011): 57.

<sup>28</sup> Another selection pressure, *power*, pushes in the opposite direction. And as Shiping Tang points out, “any framework on social evolution that does not explicitly admit power as a critical selection force is incomplete” (Tang, 2013, 24).

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Howard K. Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997).

will demonstrate, the evidence inclining us toward hope outweighs that tending toward despair. That is, *if* we keep in sight the timescale appropriate to social evolution.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a Catholic priest, scientist, and theologian who crossed evolutionary theory – down (or up) to the ideational, cultural level – with Catholic theology.<sup>30</sup> He knew that whether we think of the future as pessimists or optimists, we intuitively consider only a time period corresponding at most to our own lifetimes (or a year, or the next quarter). As such, the pessimists would seem to have the upper hand. But Chardin pointed out that the better way to decide whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about the future, is to adopt a timeframe appropriate to social evolution:

To explain or efface the appearances of a setback which, if it were true, would not only dispel a beautiful dream but encourage us to weigh up a radical absurdity of the universe, I would like to point out in the first place that to speak of experience – of the results of experience – in such a connection is premature to say the least of it. After all half a million years, perhaps even a million, were required for life to pass from the pre-hominids to modern man. Should we now start wringing our hands because, less than two centuries after glimpsing a higher state, modern man is still at loggerheads with himself? Once again we have got things out of focus. To have understood the immensity around us, behind us, and in front of us is already a first step. But if to this perception of depth another perception, that of *slowness*, be not added, we must realize that the transposition of values remains incomplete and that it can beget for our gaze nothing but an impossible world. Each dimension has its

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<sup>30</sup> See, for orthodox criticism, Scott Ventureyra, “Challenging the Rehabilitation of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,” *Crisis Magazine* (January 20, 2015).

proper rhythm. Planetary movement involves planetary majesty. Would not humanity seem to us altogether static, if, behind its history, there were not the endless stretch of its pre-history? Similarly, and despite an almost explosive acceleration of noogenesis at our level, we cannot expect to see the earth transform itself under our eyes in the space of a generation. Let us keep calm and take heart.<sup>31</sup>

While keeping calm and taking heart is as good advice as having optimism of the will, the question is whether the “omega point” de Chardin described – a convergence with the Divine to which human evolution is purportedly directed – will come in life, or in the death, of *Homo sapiens*. Will our species take advantage of our exponentially increased ability to communicate with each other and inform ourselves, or go extinct? In the absence of a benevolent dictator to guide us, our only chance is in a free marketplace of ideas, a functioning public sphere. Let us hope we have time enough to create one.

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959): 254-255. de Chardin’s neologism, “noogenesis,” essentially refers to the start of memetic or cultural evolution: the “sudden deluge of cerebralisation, this biological invasion of a new animal type which gradually eliminates or subjects all forms of life that are not human, this irresistible tide of fields and factories, this immense and growing edifice of matter and ideas – all these signs that we look at, for days on end – to proclaim that there has been a change on the earth and a change of planetary magnitude.” (de Chardin, 1959, 183)

## Chapter 1

### Information – Evolution, Psychology, and Politics

*“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”*

- H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*

Information has been evolving on earth for billions of years. While the naïve view of information is of something ethereal, formless, weightless, immaterial and the rest, in fact information never exists outside of some form of physical substrate. César Hidalgo explains that

...information *is* physical. It is as physical as Boltzmann’s atoms or the energy they carry in their motion. Information is not tangible; it is not a solid or a fluid. It does not have its own particle either, but it is as physical as movement and temperature, which also do not have particles of their own. Information is incorporeal, but it is always physically embodied. Information is not a thing; rather, it is the arrangement

of physical things. It is *physical order*, like what distinguishes different shuffles of a deck of cards.<sup>32</sup>

Information can exist in patterns of ink on paper, sound waves, electrical pulses, radio waves, magnetic flux patterns, neuronal connections, molecules, or notches on a stick. One theory of quantum physics even proposes that the most fundamental physical unit making up our universe is information.<sup>33</sup> At a physical level, information is the inverse of entropy or uncertainty. The more information we have about a physical system, the less entropy there is; and the more uncertainty a message reduces, the greater its information content.<sup>34</sup>

However, *information* is distinct from *meaning*; information is what a book or fiber optic cable transmits, while meaning is the human experience of interpreting information.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the physical world, “meaning emerges from interactions between system states. If there are no interactions, there is no meaning. For meaning to be present, particular states of one system must have particular effects on another system”<sup>36</sup> – as when information we receive changes our behavior. (For instance, when we read an article about a politician’s history of corruption, and we decide to vote for her opponent.) Hence Henry Plotkin’s insight that “adaptations are biological knowledge, and knowledge

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<sup>32</sup> César Hidalgo, *Why Information Grows: The Evolution of Order, from Atoms to Economies* (New York: Basic Books, 2015): xv.

<sup>33</sup> Luis Masanes *et al.* "Existence of an Information Unit as a Postulate of Quantum Theory," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 41 (2013); Tom Siegfried, *The Bit and the Pendulum* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> John R. Pierce. *An Introduction to Information Theory* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980): 23.

<sup>35</sup> Hidalgo, *Why Information Grows*, xvi. For more definitions of information and the different understandings they engender, see Sandra Braman, *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006): 11-21.

<sup>36</sup> John E. Mayfield, *The Engine of Complexity: Evolution as Computation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013): 41.

as we commonly understand the word is a special case of biological knowledge.”<sup>37</sup>

Everything in the biological (plants, animals) and intellectual (technology, ideas) realms is made of information, or “knowledge” in Plotkin’s sense.<sup>38</sup> The evolution of information in the biological realm accommodates relatively slow changes in the environment (e.g., thicker fur in a steadily cooling climate), and the evolution of information in the intellectual realm accommodates faster changes in the environment (e.g., bulletproof vests in a social environment where firearms are common).<sup>39</sup>

For the majority of earth’s history, the only form of information to have evolved is genetic: this information has been in the form of molecular organization, DNA and RNA. Over billions of years, this information has increased in amount and complexity through a simple process, the evolutionary algorithm: a mixture of variation, replication, and selection. Whenever these elements are found in a system, the inherited properties of the evolving entities will inevitably become ever more adapted to whichever criteria determine reproductive success.<sup>40</sup> The evolutionary algorithm has shaped DNA and the evolution of

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Plotkin, *Darwin Machines and the Nature of Knowledge* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994): xv. Plotkin goes on to explain:

What is actually meant is that knowledge is a complex set of relationships between genes and past selection pressures, between genetically guided developmental pathways and the conditions under which development occurs, and between a part of the consequent phenotypic organization and specific features of environmental order. As long as the genetical and developmental components of this rather large set of relationships are always taken as read, it suffices to point only to the expression of knowledge in terms of phenotypic organization and environmental order. ... [Another] particular instance of knowledge, namely that Germany won the [1990] World Cup, is really only the visible, or potentially visible, part of a complex multiple-layered and historically ordered hierarchical structure involving the genes which code for the brain structures that enable me to gain knowledge, development which led to the establishment of the required brain mechanisms, brain and cognitive states that are the present embodiment of that knowledge, and culture and its artifacts that allow me to learn rapidly and accurately what is occurring in a distant part of Europe. (Plotkin, 1994, 228-229)

<sup>38</sup> Used in Hidalgo and Plotkin’s sense, “information” reacquires some of its ancient meaning: “...in the environment fashioned by Aristotle’s disciples in the late middle ages – preeminently Thomas Aquinas – *informatio* and *information* were used in a broader sense to account for the way that the universe is ordered. According to their reading of Aristotle, the universe of matter is given shape and identity by the forms or essences that imbue it.” (Peters, 1988, 10)

<sup>39</sup> Plotkin, *Darwin Machines*, 144-152, 243-244.

<sup>40</sup> Mayfield, *The Engine*, 24.

life on earth. Its three components are instantiated in the case of biology by *self-replicating* molecules, which change and *vary* due to processes like random mutation, and are *selected* by their differential survival. At their very core, DNA molecules are information, instructions for making proteins – and in the aggregate, they code for the development of everything from bacteria to blue whales, our bodies and minds.<sup>41</sup>

In a universe marching inexorably toward ever greater entropy, the evolution of information occurs only under certain circumstances; but when it does occur, it produces the opposite of entropy: ever greater physical order.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, “[w]e can think of our planet as a little whirlpool of information in an otherwise vast and barren cosmos.”<sup>43</sup> The requirements for information to evolve are energy flows in non-equilibrium systems like our planet, the storage of order in solids (which protect against entropy), and the ability of matter to process information or compute.<sup>44</sup> The ability of matter to process information is different from the simple order we find throughout the universe, in solar systems, crystals, waves, weather patterns, and other processes directly produced by physical and chemical laws.<sup>45</sup> The way in which matter processes information is the evolutionary algorithm, or the “engine of complexity,” a mindless yet remarkably powerful means of producing ever greater order, or information:

All evolutionary systems rely on stored information, and all modify, add to, or delete from this body of information by following a well-defined information processing strategy.

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<sup>41</sup> John Maynard Smith, “The Concept of Information in Biology,” *Philosophy of Science* 67, no. 2 (2000). There has been some controversy on the use of information theory in biology; Griffith’s “parity thesis” sensibly proposes that evolutionarily-relevant information subsists not only in DNA, but in organisms’ environments as well (Griffiths, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Hidalgo, *Why Information Grows*, xviii-xx.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-41.

<sup>45</sup> Mayfield, *The Engine*, 15, 68-90.



At the core of every evolutionary system is a probabilistic computation that has the remarkable property of extracting purposeful information from randomly occurring events. When this computation is employed to assemble instructions for making something useful, a positive feedback loop can be established in which any change in the instructions that causes an improvement in the structures or actions specified by the instructions serves as the basis for future improvements to the instructions and their outcomes. By this means, instructions involved in this virtuous cycle get better and better over time at whatever they specify. Significantly, when the instructions specify the solution to a problem, this strategy is the most powerful method known for finding solutions to problems for which one initially has no idea about what a good solution might be.<sup>46</sup>

While the popular understanding of the evolutionary algorithm is usually traced back to Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859,<sup>47</sup> evolutionary approaches to information began nearly a century earlier with attempts to search for the origin and "common descent" of languages.<sup>48</sup> Six years before biological evolution (or the evolution of biological information) was introduced by Darwin, German linguist August Schleicher published tree diagrams of languages in an attempt to recreate a common ancestor of languages. (Language contains not only information itself in the form of vocabulary, but is also a coding protocol for information in the way that HTTP is a coding protocol for web pages, and genetics describes the coding protocol for animals.) Interestingly, one of the first

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>47</sup> Although, one could argue that the theory of evolution was prefigured by Empedocles, albeit in rough form; just as Democritus prefigured some of modern physics (Russell, 1946, 54, 64-72). Traces of evolutionary theory can also be found among early Islamic scholars (Bayrakdar, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> Donald T. Campbell, "Variation and Selective Retention in Socio-Cultural Evolution," in *Social Change in Developing Areas: A Reinterpretation of Evolutionary Theory* ed. Herbert Barringer et al., 19-49 (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1965): 21; Francis Heylighen and Klaas Chielens, "Evolution of Culture, Memetics," in *Encyclopedia of Complexity and Systems Science*, ed. Robert A. Meyers, 3205-3220 (New York: Springer, 2008): 3206.

people to recognize the importance of the evolutionary algorithm outside of biology was the psychologist William James, who pointed out that a “remarkable parallel, which I think has never been noticed, obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoological evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other.”<sup>49</sup>

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of “gene” did not exist; Darwin referred to “gemmules” as a theoretical unit of biological information that is inherited. Today in the realm of social evolution, there is no universally-accepted theoretical unit of information. Early anthropologists broke down aspects of culture into various sorts of units and studied their spread and evolution: Edward Burnett Tylor called them “institutions” and “customs”; Franz Boas called them “elements” and “traits of culture,” and the empirical manifestations of such units “incidents”; the German diffusionists referred to “trait complexes,” and conceived of traits as general ideas rather than specific empirical units; and A.L. Kroeber studied the diffusion and origin of “culture traits.”<sup>50</sup>

The analysis of social evolution took a mistaken and harmful detour through the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, and particularly his followers. Instead of viewing social evolution as the joint product of biological evolution and the evolution of information in society (“culture,” in the aggregate), Social Darwinism viewed social evolution as merely the product of biological evolution writ large. The only evolutionary dynamic it acknowledged was that guiding human biology. Ironically, it was Social Darwinism’s blindness to the importance of the evolution of cultural information as opposed to biological evolution – and, of course, its ignorance of how environmental influences affect

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Lucas McGranahan, “William James’s Social Evolutionism in Focus,” *The Pluralist* 6, no. 3 (2011): 80.

<sup>50</sup> Lee R. Lyman and Michael J. O’Brien, “Cultural Traits: Units of Analysis in Early Twentieth-Century Anthropology,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 59, no. 2 (2003).

physiological and psychological development – that was to eventually doom the project. But before Social Darwinism became largely extinct, it spread virulently in the social environment of the United States in the 1880s and '90s, receptive as it was to justifications for competition, individualism, territorial expansion, and plutocracy.<sup>51</sup> The popularity of Social Darwinism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its ties to eugenics and rightwing ideology, made later attempts to apply evolutionary theorizing to the social realm anathema to many social scientists.<sup>52</sup>

A cogent, contemporary criticism of Social Darwinists was offered by Gabriel Tarde, possibly the first precursor of the modern memetic view of cultural evolution.<sup>53</sup> He criticized as unjustifiable the conflation of biological and cultural evolution in their use of the term heredity: “They use this word indifferently to express the transmission of vital characteristics through reproduction and the transmission of ideas and customs, of social things, by ancestral tradition, by domestic education, and by custom-imitation.”<sup>54</sup> In Tarde’s view, like those today who study gene-culture coevolution, the evolution of biology and culture are separate and complementary. While the reactionary applications of Social Darwinism (eugenics, racism, militarism) have led many well-intentioned people to scorn all evolutionary approaches to the stuff of society and culture, Tarde explained nearly a century ago why this is mistaken:

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<sup>51</sup> Walter G. Runciman, *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 18.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, “Variation,” 23-26; Geoffrey M. Hodgson and Thorbjørn Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture: The Search for General Principles of Social and Economic Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 13-18.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Marsden, "Forefathers of Memetics: Gabriel Tarde and the Laws of Imitation," *Journal of Memetics-Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 4, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>54</sup> Gabriel de Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Crews Parsons (New York: Henry Holt, 1903), xv.

But we may accord to the biological side of social facts the highest importance without going as far as to maintain that there is a water-tight bulkhead between different races.... Taken in this false and unjustifiable sense, the idea of race leads the sociologist who has taken it for a guide to conceive of the end of social progress as a disintegration of peoples who are walled about and shut off from one another and everlastingly at war with one another. This kind of naturalism is generally associated with a defence of militarism. On the other hand, if we take the ideas of invention, imitation, and social logic as a guiding thread, we are led to the more reassuring perspective of a great future confluence – alas, that it is not immediate – of multiple divisions of mankind into a single peaceful human family.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, while Social Darwinism views social evolution as the product of vicious survival of the fittest between different human “races,” an accurate view of modern human evolution comprises two forms of evolution: one of biology, and the other of ideas.<sup>56</sup> And it is the evolution of ideas which promises not war and conflict between societies, but confluence and cooperation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>56</sup> Tarde’s views on race were remarkably modern for a man of his time. He explicitly recognized the nature of “race” as a social construction, at a time when “racial science” purported there to be meaningful and vast biological differences between “races.” He wrote: “I must not be accused of the absurd idea of denying in all of this the influence of race upon social facts. But I think that on account of the number of its acquired characteristics, race is the outcome, and not the source, of these facts, and only in this hitherto ignored sense does it appear to me to come within the special province of the sociologist.” (Tarde, 1903, 19)

<sup>57</sup> Tarde’s optimism may seem unwarranted, but from the perspective of evolutionary theory, with its focus on adaptation to changed circumstances, it may not be:

Thus while in the past, man’s capacity for ethnocentric loyalty, willingness for altruistic self-sacrifice in warfare, and capacity for out-group hate may have been positively selected, the changes introduced in the environment by modern weapons and increased national size may make the once-noble virtues self-destructive anachronisms. They may however, be so firmly embedded in the social-motivational nature of man that social planners will have to reckon with them for some time to come. (Campbell, 1965, 35)

Tarde's revolutionary perspective was to propose *ideas* themselves as the principle "actors" in social phenomena.<sup>58</sup> Ideas spread through society through imitation and counter-imitation, and they are combined in novel mixtures to produce inventions, which are themselves imitated or copied. Ideas can be adopted either through "substitution" or a choice between two alternatives (similar to a gene and its allele), or through "accumulation" or a logical union of two ideas; and an idea's success in spreading is determined by the compatibility of that idea with the current environment of other ideas.<sup>59</sup> Tarde even defined "reason" itself as a specific desire for coherence between accepted ideas.<sup>60</sup> That is, what a given society considers reasonable – a selection mechanism – is merely that which does not contradict the commonly-held ideas in that society. Another selection mechanism Tarde notes is that of prestige, with ideas originating from or held by prestigious persons, classes, localities, or times spreading faster and further than others. Interestingly, in modern democratic societies public opinion seems to be cloaked with the same prestige formerly reserved for monarchs, such that the attraction of already-popular ideas is reinforced by the mere fact of their popularity – a phenomenon Tarde viewed with deep distrust. Also, Tarde's view of cultural evolution is not strictly teleological or deterministic, but probabilistic: just because two ideas *could* be fruitfully combined to create an invention, does not mean they will. This he illustrates with an example from ancient Babylon, which had both books and bricks marked with the names of their makers using moveable characters or stamps; yet the thought of combining the two ideas to create

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<sup>58</sup> Tarde may have been influenced by the evolutionary thinking of contemporary anthropologists, whose work he explicitly called upon as evidentiary support for his own evolutionary theory of imitation.

<sup>59</sup> Marsden, "Forefathers."

<sup>60</sup> Tarde, *The Laws*, 149.

a printing press thousands of years ahead of its eventual invention in China was not conceived at the time.<sup>61</sup>

Tarde even adapted his evolutionary mechanism of imitation and innovation to explain political development. The conservative or right-wing faction seeks to maintain and conserve the commonly-accepted ideas of the past and present, while the liberal or left-wing faction seeks to introduce newly-combined or foreign ideas.<sup>62</sup> The right seeks to preserve that which was formerly accepted, while the left seeks to introduce new ideas into acceptance; both together create a spiraling process of the conservation of old and proven ideas, then the absorption and incorporation of new ideas, then the conservation of the old and newly-accepted ideas, and so on. Tarde wrote:

The innovating party plays, then, in all of this, only a transitory, although an indispensable, part. It serves as a mediator between the spirit of comparatively narrow conservatism which precedes it and the spirit of comparatively liberal conservatism which follows it. (Consequently, traditionalism should no longer be opposed to liberalism. From our point of view, the two are inseparable.) *Without hereditary imitation*, without conservative tradition, any invention or novelty that was introduced by a liberal party would perish still-born, for the latter is related to the former like shadow to substance, or, rather, like a light to its lamp. The most radical revolutions seek to be traditionalised, so to speak, and, reciprocally, at the source of the most rigid traditions we find some revolutionary condition.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 289-90.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 295.

Tarde's view of cultural evolution as the aggregate of individual imitation (conceived broadly as encompassing education, copying ideas and behaviors, reading books and newspapers, etc.) and innovation was sharply contested by his contemporary Emile Durkheim.<sup>64</sup> In Durkheim's view, sociology could not be built up from the basis of inter-individual processes, because these were so little understood. Instead, Durkheim took a top-down approach, looking at collective influences operating on individuals: "Each social group really has a collective inclination for [an] act, quite its own, and the source of all individual inclinations, rather than their result."<sup>65</sup> Durkheim's notion of collective representations, rather than being spread by individual to individual by an epidemiological process like imitation, was already-commonly shared ideas in a community that help produce social cohesion. And while Tarde's ideas about imitation were an unacknowledged precursor to memetic theory, Durkheim's collective representations were a direct and acknowledged inspiration for Serge Moscovici's later conception of social representations.<sup>66</sup> Today, however, there is no need for conflict between Tarde and Durkheim's respective progeny.

Tarde would likely be elated by the recent rapid growth in cross-disciplinary work on evolutionary approaches to culture – and Durkheim might even concede that the inter-individual processes that were so poorly understood in his day are finally ready to provide the building blocks for a bottom-up view of society to complement his own approach. This new research includes studies on the emergence of social learning, traditions, or proto-

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<sup>64</sup> Eduardo Viana Vargas et al., "The Debate Between Tarde and Durkheim," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 5 (2008).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>66</sup> Over half a century after Tarde and Durkheim's debate, Moscovici wrote in his 1961 exposition of social representations, *La Psychanalyse, Son Image et Son Public*, that "[t]he Durkheim-Tarde controversy is still present in everyone's memory" (Moscovici, 2008, 29).

culture in nonhuman animals; the emergence of true cultural evolution among hominids during the Stone Age, and its rapid acceleration during the Upper Palaeolithic period; the application of methodologies from evolutionary biology to cultural evolution, and the parallels between biological and cultural evolution; and the development of “rational imitation” and “over-imitation” in children as the basis for the replication of cultural units of evolution.<sup>67</sup> Major advances have also been made in evolutionary perspectives in sociology, archaeology, economics, international politics, and the social sciences more generally.<sup>68</sup>

The stage is now set to develop what Lev Vygotsky outlined nearly a century ago: As an individual only exists as a social being, as a member of some social group within whose context he follows the road of his historical development, the composition of his personality and the structure of his behaviour turn out to be a quantity which is dependent on social evolution and whose main aspects are determined by the latter. ... It is not, of course, that biological evolution has come to a stop and that the species 'man' is a stable, unchangeable, constant quantity, but rather that the basic laws and the essential factors which direct the process of biological evolution have receded to the background and have either completely fallen away or have become a reduced or sub-dominant part of new and more complex laws governing human social development. ... New laws, which regulate the

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<sup>67</sup> Andrew Whiten et al., "Culture Evolves," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 366, no. 1567 (2011).

<sup>68</sup> Marion Blute, *Darwinian Sociocultural Evolution: Solutions to Dilemmas in Cultural and Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Hodgson and Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture*; Alex Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution: How Darwinian Theory Can Explain Human Culture and Synthesize the Social Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Runciman, *The Theory*; Stephan Shennan, *Genes, Memes and Human History: Darwinian Archaeology and Cultural Evolution* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Shiping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



course of human history and which cover the entire process of the material and mental development of human society, now take their place.<sup>69</sup>

Three conceptually and empirically developed constructs that help to explain the evolution, dynamics, and function of information in society will be discussed, compared, and synthesized. While all three share considerable overlap, they can be roughly separated by differing scope and focus.<sup>70</sup> Memetics or meme theory focuses on the evolution of information, and its scope encompasses information from individual words to entire ideologies. Schema theory focuses on the dynamics of information in the human mind, and its scope is somewhat larger than individual words and somewhat smaller than a worldview or ideology. Social representations theory focuses on the social function of information, and its scope is more restricted, encompassing only socially-shared ideas with multiple components, including entire worldviews.

### **i. Memes**

*"[A] few billion years passed, while multicellular life forms explored various nooks and crannies of Design Space until, one fine day, [an] invasion began, in a single species of multicellular organism, a sort of primate, which had developed a variety of structures and capacities ... that just happened to be particularly well suited for these invaders. It is not surprising that the invaders were well adapted for finding homes in their hosts, since they were themselves created by their hosts, in much the way spiders create webs and birds create nests. In a twinkling – less than a hundred thousand years – these new invaders transformed*

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<sup>69</sup> Lev S. Vygotsky, *The Vygotsky Reader*, ed. René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner (Hoboken, NJ): Blackwell, 1998), 175-176.

<sup>70</sup> Csaba Pléh, "Thoughts on the Distribution of Thoughts: Memes or Epidemics," *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2003).

*the apes who were their unwitting hosts into something altogether new: witting hosts, who, thanks to their huge stock of newfangled invaders, could imagine the heretofore unimaginable, leaping through Design Space as nothing had ever done before. ... I call the invaders memes, and the radically new kind of entity created when a particular sort of animal is properly furnished by - or infested with - memes is what is commonly called a person.*

- Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*

*And is it not a dream which none of you remember having dreamt that built your city and fashioned all there is in it?*

- Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, "Farewell"

To understand the meme as a theoretical construct, we have to go back to the context in which it was introduced: in 1976 with Richard Dawkin's *The Selfish Gene*,<sup>71</sup> a popularization of the theory that evolution acts only on the genetic (as opposed to the organismic or group) level. The book tells an amazing creation tale, one that surely rivals the creation myths of religion. It starts billions of years ago, when all of the matter in the universe was condensed in a small space of unimaginable density and temperature. (Imagine the whole planet condensed into a grain of sand, and hotter than the sun.) Then, nearly 14 billion years ago, this mass of condensed, supercharged matter exploded,

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<sup>71</sup> Only the term itself was introduced by Dawkins; similar ideas about cultural evolution had been developing since Darwin's day (Costall, 1991; Hodgson and Knudsen, 2012, 8-13; Jesiek, 2003; Pléh 2003, 30; Plotkin, 1993, 61-72).

expanding into space.<sup>72</sup> As this matter rushed out at incredible speeds into space, it aggregated into planets and stars, attracted together by gravity into solar systems like ours. On our planet,<sup>73</sup> atoms were constantly being attracted to each other in different combinations, forming molecules. By the laws of physical attraction and repulsion, and with sudden influxes of concentrated energy in the form of sunlight, volcanic eruptions, and lightning, some of these combinations of atoms happened to make copies of themselves from the atomic and molecular matter bouncing into each other on a planet devoid of life. All it took was for one molecule or chain of molecules to arise that had the property of attracting bits and pieces of atomic material, which would then be formed into a replica of the original molecule: this was the first replicator. From this inauspicious beginning came all of the products of biological evolution: great sequoias, dinosaurs, mushrooms, birds, whales, humans, and all the rest.<sup>74</sup>

How a nonliving, self-replicating molecule with less complexity than a virus came to create the staggering diversity of the biological world is an illustration of the power of the evolutionary algorithm. The evolutionary algorithm is the differential survival of

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<sup>72</sup> Whether the Big Bang was caused by God or a god, or that the universe is itself eternal and infinite – in which case existence itself would have the characteristics of a god – is left uncertain, and probably unknowable, unless of course one day a god deigns to reveal itself in a manner intelligible to all humanity.

<sup>73</sup> And, it is arguably statistically probable that this occurred on many of the other estimated septillion planets in the universe.

<sup>74</sup> Kathleen Taylor analogizes:

As for our planet, so for each human brain. Early changes are huge, shaping our still-fluid cognitive landscapes, determining the major patterns of our personalities. A meteor at this stage could have catastrophic effects on future development. Gradually things settle down, the fierceness of early emotions cools, the rate of change decreases. And, just as life took hold on the young Earth, each species carving out its own niche, so the miasma of culture settles over our landscapes, shaping them in innumerable ways. Thoughts, the inhabitants of the neural world, flourish in their millions. Some, like fossils, leave a mark; most die in silence. Like living things, they are clearly distinguishable into species, yet each is unique. And, like living things, thoughts can replicate, spreading from brain to brain as we may one day spread from world to world. (Taylor, 2006, 106-107)

imperfectly replicating entities displaying fidelity, fecundity, and longevity – and the algorithm itself is substrate-neutral, meaning that there is no reason why it cannot be applied to a variety of different domains.<sup>75</sup> In the biological domain, to return to our creation tale, the self-replicating molecular ancestors of DNA displayed fidelity (they would make accurate copies of themselves most of the time), fecundity (they would make several copies of themselves, given the right raw material or molecular “food” in the environment), and longevity (they would usually survive long enough to make copies of themselves). The next part of the evolutionary algorithm’s application in this domain is that they sometimes replicated imperfectly. Most likely in the vast majority of flawed replications, the flaw or mutation was such that the resulting molecule could not, according to the laws of physics and chemistry, make copies of itself. Those molecules would “die off,” and drift away into the lifeless sea. However, on some rare occasions, a copying error in a replicating molecule would result in a molecular structure that was still able to replicate itself in its new form. This is the “differential survival” part of the algorithm: some self-replicating molecules of different forms tended to make more copies of themselves than others. Some of these molecules may have been composed of more readily-available atomic matter in their environment, and so could make more copies of themselves; others may have grown larger and more stable, allowing them to stay together for longer, making more copies of themselves over a longer period. Whatever the actual case may have been, at some point these self-replicating molecules evolved to build structures around themselves out of the available atomic material. The cell was born. Now, instead of self-replicating molecules freely flowing through the earth’s oceans, accumulating atomic material out of which to

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<sup>75</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

make copies of themselves, there were self-replicating *cells* swimming about, carrying inside them the descendants of the first self-replicating molecules: DNA. Single-celled organisms evolved into many-celled organisms, and multicellular organisms eventually evolved into the animals and plants of today. To make a rough analogy between DNA and human beings, in the beginning there was just us, swimming around naked and reproducing; the development of cells would be like us putting on armor or a wetsuit for self-protection; and the eventual development of plants and animals would be like the characters in Japanese *manga* building massive robots to pilot around.

At the core of this creation story is the evolutionary algorithm, applied to self-replicating molecules. The algorithm resulted in an exponential growth over time in size of the self-replicating molecules and the cells and bodies they eventually created – and all it took was the differential survival of imperfectly replicating entities featuring fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. The evolutionary algorithm is a mindless process that guarantees results, given the right conditions.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the growth of a tiny seed into a large tree or vine is a mindless process that guarantees results, given good soil, sunlight, and water.

However, rather than the evolutionary algorithm itself, the starring role in *The Selfish Gene* was given to the anti-hero pilot of massive biological robots, the gene. Hence, when Dawkins introduced the “meme” concept later in the book, it was straightforward for readers to consider it a mere analogue of the gene; and to consider the worth of the meme concept to hinge on the closeness of the gene-meme analogy. But as Susan Blackmore later described the most basic principle of meme theory: “genes and memes are both replicators

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

but otherwise they are different.”<sup>77</sup> Henry Plotkin adds that “all of memetic replication looks different from genetic replication: not much longevity except for core conventional meaning and startling detail; very little fidelity apart from simple memes; and a fecundity that probably varies from person to person as a result of differences in cognitive capacity yet to be understood.”<sup>78</sup> Memetic evolution, while analogous at a deep level to genetic evolution, is much more complex.<sup>79</sup> This is where most criticism of meme theory flounders: by itself, the analogy to genetic evolution is inessential. What is essential is that the evolutionary algorithm, or “complexity machine” – *in the abstract* – applies to information in the human mind as much as it does to information in DNA. The two are separate instantiations of the same process, similar in some ways and different in others.<sup>80</sup> The evolutionary economist Stanley Metcalfe clarifies that this is not “intrinsically a matter of biological analogy; it is a matter of evolutionary logic. Evolutionary theory is a manner of reasoning in its own right, quite independent of the use made of it by biologists. They simply got there first...”<sup>81</sup>

A meme is the theoretical basic unit<sup>82</sup> of informational/cultural evolution: it is that information which is subject to the evolutionary algorithm, and selected in a cultural

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 66.

<sup>78</sup> Plotkin, *Darwin Machines*, 222.

<sup>79</sup> Campbell, “Variation,” 42; Heylighen and Chielens, “Evolution.”

<sup>80</sup> “What is the difference between analogy and generalization? Analogies take phenomena and processes in one domain as reference points for the study of similar phenomena or processes in another domain. ... Generalization in science starts from a deliberately copious array of different phenomena and processes, without giving analytic priority to any of them. Where possible, scientists adduce shared principles. Given that entities and processes involved are very different, these common principles will be fairly abstract and will not reflect detailed mechanisms unique to any particular domain. The very triumph of successful generalization is in the face of real and acknowledged differences at the level of detail. ... Generalizing Darwinism does not rely on the mistaken idea that the mechanisms of evolution in the social and the biological worlds are similar in a substantive sense.” (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2012, 22-23)

<sup>81</sup> J. Stanley Metcalfe, “Evolutionary Concepts in Relation to Evolutionary Economics,” in *The Evolutionary Foundations of Economics*, ed. Kurt Dopfer, 391-430 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 420.

<sup>82</sup> Moscovici on the use of theoretical entities for scientific explanation:

environment. The meme is a dizzyingly broad concept. It can encompass everything from a peculiar noise to a software virus; from a chair, to your idea of a chair, to instructions for making a chair; from a joke, to a story, to an entire ideology. (The most common contemporary understanding of a meme is a picture accompanied by humorous text spread over the internet – this sort of meme would be a tiny subset of what the original term was meant to include.) However, for particularly large chunks of information like ideologies, legal arguments, and religions, the term “memeplex” can be used; it denotes a collection of self-reinforcing memes that tend to replicate together.<sup>83</sup> As a phenomenon for empirical investigation, the staggering breadth of the meme concept threatens to make it useless; as Serge Moscovici warned about Durkheim’s collective representations, “by attempting to include too much, one grasps little: grasp all, lose all.”<sup>84</sup> However, for empirical investigations of memes, Pocklington and Best’s definition may avoid the problem of overbreadth:

The appropriate units of selection will be *the largest units of socially transmitted information that reliably and repeatedly withstand transmission*. ... The two important characteristics of this definition are that a unit be large enough to exhibit

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Generally speaking, explanatory concepts are likely to be abstract and ill-defined, as was true of the gravitational force in mechanics, the atom in physics, the gene in biology and social classes in Marxism. Their existence was assumed to be proven and then many things were explained by their intervention, although they themselves remained as obscure as ever. Let us say that they were figments of thought rather than real entities, to use a rather antiquated phrase. It was known what each of them *did*, and nobody cared what each of them *was*. But once something is conceived and endowed with an explanatory power, one must try to advance further and grasp the reality of the force or the phenomenon in question. Progress can be made no other way. (Moscovici, 1988, 223)

<sup>83</sup> Blackmore, *The Meme*, 19-20.

<sup>84</sup> Serge Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology* (New York: NYU Press, 2001): 30.

properties that may covary with replication success and still be small enough to have robustly developing characteristics that reappear from host to host.<sup>85</sup>

So while, for instance, the ideology of “free trade” may be an interesting topic to study, and by definition it is composed of memes, meme theory is limited by available methodologies. For empirical investigation, it may be necessary to restrict the scope of the meme to informational chunks that reliably and repeatedly withstand transmission, by identifying statistically relevant co-occurrences of words in internet posts, for example.<sup>86</sup> “Free trade” and other ideologies are better studied using methodologies appropriate to large amounts of information, like those used in social representations research.

## **ii. What meme theory is not**

*“No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of our knowledge.*

*The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.*

*If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.*

*The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.*

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<sup>85</sup> Richard Pocklington and Michael L. Best, "Cultural evolution and units of selection in replicating text," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 188, no. 1 (1997): 81.

<sup>86</sup> Best (1997) used this operationalization to demonstrate that groups of memes can be said to “compete” for space on internet discussion forums, with one “quasi-species” of memes crowding out others within the same niche, much like in ecological niches. Similar computer-aided text analyses have been used in social representations research (Wagner and Hayes, 2005, 344-345).



*The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.*

*And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.*

*For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man."*

- Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, "Teaching"

Critiques of meme theory have often focused on the weakness of the gene-meme analogy.<sup>87</sup> This is certainly a problem to the extent to which meme theory relies on analogy. But regardless of the strength of the gene-meme analogy, it is important to recognize that it is not a defining characteristic of the memetic perspective or theorizing about cultural evolution in general. What is important is that information in human society evolves, because it is subject to the evolutionary algorithm. The evolutionary algorithm, or universal Darwinism, acknowledges that there are significant ontological differences between genes and memes at the level of detail; but at the abstract level, there are important ontological

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<sup>87</sup> Nicolas Claidière and Jean-Baptiste André, "The Transmission of Genes and Culture: A Questionable Analogy," *Evolutionary Biology* 39, no. 1 (2012); Maria Kronfeldner, *Darwinian Creativity and Memetics* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2011); Adam Kuper, "If Memes Are the Answer, What Is the Question," in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 180-193. These critiques share a common flaw:

It is a common misunderstanding that generalizing Darwinism assumes that the detailed mechanisms of social and biological evolution are similar. This amazing misconception contradicts the very notion of explanatory unification in the face of complex and varied phenomena, which is central to all scientific explanation. Scientific explanations always involve generalities because they abstract from specific detail relating to the expression of particular phenomena. When metal airplanes and feathered birds fly, some similar principles are at work. But the detailed mechanisms are very different. It is obvious that social evolution and biological evolution are different. And evolutionary mechanisms are expressed in very different ways *within* the biological (or the social) domain. Instead of detailed similarity, the idea of generalizing Darwinism depends on a degree of ontological communality at a high level of abstraction. This communality is captured by the broad idea of a complex population system and the formulation of general concepts of selection and replication. (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2012, 224, references removed)

similarities.<sup>88</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin observed that “[f]or a mind that has awakened to the full meaning of evolution, mere inexplicable similitude is resolved in *identity*,”<sup>89</sup> and Garry Runciman points out:

Information is not a metaphorical term needing to be cashed into something else. It is the reality. Although much of the language of science is metaphorical and none the worse for it, there is no other thing for which theorists of cultural selection are using the concept of information transfer to stand proxy. However difficult it is, when behavior is the phenotypic expression of information transmitted by imitation or learning, to say what exactly are the units or bundles of information passing from mind to mind that are competitively selected (or not), their mutation and recombination are no less a matter of literal fact than when computer scientists splice the codes for programs, cross them over, and see how the consequences work themselves out.<sup>90</sup>

An even better example than code-splicing is the fact that the evolutionary algorithm has been applied to computer programs, and has produced remarkable results: software that can improve itself, or work out ever better solutions to problems.<sup>91</sup> Prions, antibodies, and computer viruses are other examples of evolving replicators.<sup>92</sup> These provide an illustration of the substrate-neutrality of the evolutionary algorithm: it works for genes,

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<sup>88</sup> Hodgson and Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture*, 38.

<sup>89</sup> de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 223

<sup>90</sup> Walter G. Runciman, "Culture Does Evolve," *History and Theory* 44, no. 1 (2005): 4-5.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Aunger, *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Hodgson and Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture*; Mo Jamshidi, "Tools for Intelligent Control: Fuzzy Controllers, Neural Networks and Genetic Algorithms," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 361, no. 1809 (2003); Mayfield, *The Engine*, 145-169.

<sup>92</sup> Aunger, *The Electric Meme*, 94-113; Mayfield, *The Engine*, 181-191; Plotkin, *Darwin Machines*, 70-72.

memes, the immune system, prions, computer software and viruses, and anywhere else that can “run” the algorithm.

Today, it seems ironic that one of the most cogent original criticisms of the meme concept was that, unlike genes, memes are insufficiently discrete and separable to be subject to the evolutionary algorithm. Yet developments in genetics over the intervening years have begun to make the gene seem nearly as much a fuzzy, hard-to-isolate entity.<sup>93</sup> According to bioinformaticians Sonja Prohaska and Peter Stadler, “the classical molecular concept of a gene as a contiguous stretch of DNA encoding a functional product is inconsistent with the complexity and diversity of genomic organization.”<sup>94</sup> Another criticism of the meme concept focused on a different aspect of discontinuity in the gene-meme analogy: the ability of memes to change before being passed on, making them, in a sense, Lamarckian evolutionary entities. Today, evidence of an ability of organisms to change their own DNA during their lifetimes has inspired a heated debate in genetics, with bacterial geneticist James Shapiro arguing that “[t]he capacity of living organisms to alter their own heredity is undeniable,” and that the very use of the term “‘gene’ gives the false impression of specifying a definite entity when, in fact, it can mean any number of different genomic components.”<sup>95</sup> So much for the gene-meme analogy being inapposite.

In fact, developments in cognitive science and linguistics have strengthened one aspect of the gene-meme analogy: sexual recombination. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s (explicitly evolutionary) theory of conceptual blending shows how the human brain routinely takes aspects of two or more concepts and recombines them in a novel blend – as

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<sup>93</sup> Blute, *Darwinian Sociocultural*, 115-20.

<sup>94</sup> Sonja J. Prohaska and Peter F. Stadler, “Genes,” *Theory in Biosciences* 127, no. 3 (2008): 215.

<sup>95</sup> James A. Shapiro, *Evolution: A View from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: FT Press Science, 2011): 2, 29.

also happens to the DNA of mother and father during meiosis.<sup>96</sup> This ability explains a key source of variation in cultural evolution: ideas do not simply mutate to provide novel variants for selection, but they are also combined in novel admixtures. Examples abound, including metaphors (“digging one’s own grave”), analogies (“cultural evolution is like biological evolution”), counterfactuals (“if I were you, I would...”), category extensions (“animal rights,” “computer virus”), and countless inventions originating from devices originally meant for different uses (like the fork from the pitchfork).<sup>97</sup> Conceptual blending, like sex, is an important contributor of variation needed for the evolutionary algorithm to function.<sup>98</sup> Interesting or useful blends spread widely, whether in popular culture (the Minotaur, Spiderman), science (disciplines “blending” by adopting methodologies or perspectives from other disciplines), technology (smartphones as blends of telephones and computers), law (intellectual property), institutions (the *brigade de cuisine* blending aspects of French military organization with the operation of a kitchen), etc. And it is powerful; as Steve Jobs attested, “[c]reativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really *do* it, they just *saw* something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 384. For a wide array of inventions and their evolutionary histories, see Charles Panati, *Panati's Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (New York: William Morrow, 1987).

<sup>98</sup> Mayfield, *The Engine*, 255.

<sup>99</sup> Steve Jobs and Gary Wolf, “The Next Insanely Great Thing,” *Wired*, February 1, 1996, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.wired.com/1996/02/jobs-2/>

A more useful critique of meme theory focuses on transmission mechanisms, and the issue of imitation.<sup>100</sup> Here, as Dan Sperber points out, it is important to remember that a simple form of imitation is not how information is normally transmitted from person to person.<sup>101</sup> Information transfer is mediated by attributing intentions, making inferences, linguistic rules, evolved dispositions, and other processes that decode and reconstruct incoming messages with greater or lesser success. And at the neuronal level, even cultural attributes cause different patterns of brain activity when making the simplest of perceptual judgments.<sup>102</sup> Then is the copying fidelity of information from person to person is too low to support the evolutionary algorithm? This has been addressed from a very practical perspective by archaeologist Stephen Shennan: “even though there may be all sorts of things going on in the mind, the resemblance between the inputs and the outputs is often very striking, as the example of the continuity in many prehistoric pottery traditions clearly demonstrates.”<sup>103</sup> Clearly, there is variation here: from direct and easy imitation or information transmission (as with pottery traditions, technological know-how, recipes, etc.), to information resistant to direct transmission or imitation (as with feelings, culturally specific understandings, etc.). As the biophysicist John Mayfield explains:

The engine of complexity [or evolutionary algorithm] works on a body of information that is evaluated in some way, requires a mechanism for copying and modifying this information, and operates in an environment that provides

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<sup>100</sup> The argument this critique has generated is quite similar to the 1903 debate between Tarde and Durkheim, in which Durkheim attacked and Tarde defended the latter’s view of imitation as a transmission mechanism (Vargas et al., 2008).

<sup>101</sup> Dan Sperber, “An Objection to the Memetic Approach to Culture,” in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger, 169-173 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>102</sup> Trey Hedden et al., “Cultural Influences on Neural Substrates of Attentional Control,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>103</sup> Shennan, *Genes, Memes*, 47.

consistent selection favoring some, but not all, of the modifications. Society as a whole and most social institutions examined separately exhibit all these features. Controversies arise over the nature of the information and the mode of copying, but it is not all that mysterious. Fundamentally, the information that underlies and enables social institutions resides in people's heads.<sup>104</sup>

To avoid the problematic nature of imitation and how it should be defined in interpersonal communication, Robert Aunger suggests the meme be redefined as "the state of a node in a neuronal network capable of generating a copy of itself in either the same or a different neuronal network,"<sup>105</sup> or "a configuration in one node of a neuronal network that is able to induce the replication of its state in other nodes."<sup>106</sup> Viewing memes as nodes in a neuronal network helps reveal that even if there are random<sup>107</sup> copying errors or information loss during interpersonal communication, the central tendency of the copies will still float around the original meme. Therefore on a population level, the original or normative meme will be dominant, and copying fidelity is high enough for evolution to occur.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Mayfield, *The Engine*, 272-273.

<sup>105</sup> Aunger, *The Electric Meme*, 325.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>107</sup> If copying errors are not random, this poses another problem. Dan Sperber's idea of "cultural attractors" posits a sort of biased, nonrandom copying error tendency, but this is not fatal to theories of cultural evolution (Driscoll, 2011). Cultural attractors do entertainingly explain, however, how the "meme" meme itself has evolved:

And what is the attractor around which the "meme" meme gravitates? The meme idea—or rather a constellation of trivialized versions of it—has become an extraordinarily successful bit of contemporary culture not because it has been faithfully replicated again and again, but because our conversation often does revolve—and here is the cultural attractor—around remarkably successful bits of culture that, in the time of mass media and the internet, pop up more and more frequently and are indeed quite relevant to our understanding of the world we live in. They attract our attention even when—or, possibly, especially when—we don't understand that well what they are and how they come about. The meaning of "meme" has drifted from Dawkins' precise scientific idea to a means to refer to these striking and puzzling objects. (Sperber, 2012, 183)

<sup>108</sup> Aunger, *The Electric Meme*, 249.

A review of current neuroscientific research both supports and complicates this view.<sup>109</sup> There is some evidence of individual concepts being encoded by individual neurons – the localist, “grandmother” or “Halle Berry” cell theory, with one cell coding one concept – but the evidence is inconclusive. Better supported is that individual concepts are encoded in representations distributed through a neural network. Concepts are grounded in perception and action, and their storage is distributed across sensory and motor areas of the brain – meaning that our representation of concepts depends at a most fundamental level on our own idiosyncratic experiences. Most interestingly, even abstract concepts seem to be stored in neural networks that include memory traces from our own experiences: “Complementing sensory-motor representations, abstract concepts such as ‘to free’, but also ‘truth’ and ‘relationship’ are typically strongly associated with emotions and may also include introspective information about internal states experienced in corresponding situations (e.g., in a situation, in which an individual felt freed in the past).”<sup>110</sup> Thus it seems that at a fundamental, neuronal level, information certainly does get copied more or less accurately from individual to individual (close enough for jazz, or for evolution to occur at the population level). But that information may *feel* entirely different from person to person, depending on their memories of experiences that are tied into the very neuronal encoding of that information. Hence the distinction between information and understanding or meaning: two people may have the same information in

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<sup>109</sup> Markus Kiefer and Friedemann Pulvermüller, "Conceptual Representations in Mind and Brain: Theoretical Developments, Current Evidence and Future Directions," *Cortex* 48, no. 7 (2012).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 820.

their brains, yet understand it completely differently owing to their individual experiences and sets of knowledge linked to such information.<sup>111</sup>

Regardless of inter-individual differences in the storing of information, developments in our understanding of “mirror neurons” have supported the memetic view that information evolves and spreads on a neuronal level through imitation.<sup>112</sup> Although mutations are far more common in memetic evolution than in biological evolution, this does not make memes or cultural information an impossible candidate for the evolutionary algorithm.<sup>113</sup>

### iii. What meme theory provides

What is most important about the meme concept is not that it represents a radically new scientific theory with testable predictions and surprising results. It is not: memetics as a research paradigm, with its own unique methodologies, has not yet achieved any great success.<sup>114</sup> (It has had only modest success.)<sup>115</sup> Still less is it important as a term of art in

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<sup>111</sup> “Our sensations and feelings are, physiologically speaking, uniquely our own. My nerve endings terminate in my own brain, not yours. No central exchange exists where I can patch my sensory inputs into yours, nor is there any sort of ‘wireless’ contact through which to transmit my immediate experience of the world to you. ... [H]umans are hardwired by the privacy of their experience to have communication problems.” (Peters, 2012, 4)

<sup>112</sup> Adam McNamara, "Can We Measure Memes?" *Frontiers in Evolutionary Neuroscience*, 3 (2011).

<sup>113</sup> Gonçalo C. Cardoso and Jonathan W. Atwell, "Directional Cultural Change by Modification and Replacement of Memes," *Evolution* 65, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>114</sup> Robert Aunger, “What’s the matter with memes?” in *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*, ed. Alan Grafen and Mark Ridley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Bruce Edmonds, “The Revealed Poverty of the Gene-Meme Analogy - Why Memetics per se Has Failed to Produce Substantive Results,” *Journal of Memetics-Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 9, no. 1 (2005). However, I could not replicate Edmonds’ finding about the precipitous drop in papers on Google Scholar mentioning “memetics” but not “memetic algorithm”. The search string [memetics -“memetic algorithm”] found around 200 results in the year 2000, and over 1000 results in 2010. This could be due to changes in Google’s search algorithm or an increase in the body of material it covered since Edmond’s paper was written.

<sup>115</sup> E.g., Lada A. Adamic et al., "Information Evolution in Social Networks," *arXiv preprint arXiv:1402.6792* (2014);

Michele Coscia, "Average is Boring: How Similarity Kills a Meme's Success," *Scientific Reports* 4 (2014); Chip Heath et al., "Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (2001); Tobias Kuhn et al., "Inheritance Patterns in Citation Networks Reveal Scientific



the advertising industry, or as a catchall term for viral picture-jokes on the internet. Instead, the memetic perspective is valuable as just that: a *perspective*. It replaces what at times is our implicit, unexamined view of our own knowledge: it feels as though we have actively sought out the best, most accurate ideas and beliefs from those available. It is as if we stood atop a sort of intellectual Mount Olympus, with all ideas, beliefs, ideologies, etc., within our view, and then we choose among them according to our own (impeccable) taste and judgment. In contrast, the memetic perspective is both explicit and humbling, reminding us that our beliefs and knowledge are contingent upon the information we have been taught, indoctrinated with, or learned on our own – at the very least, the information we *have been exposed to* – and that there is no guarantee that the information we have absorbed has any close correspondence with the reality it purports to describe. This view cuts through needless obfuscation and intellectual anachronisms to get at the key constituent of culture, politics, and social organization: information. This perspective, in a way, teases us into looking at information itself as an agent that spreads through the human population subject only to the constraints of the social and physical environment.<sup>116</sup> And as an agent, one does not have to be Josef Goebbels to know that information can be very powerful.

The meme's eye view provides an important perspective on ideology. Legal scholar Jack Balkin argues from a memetic perspective that

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Memes," *Physical Review X* 4, no. 4 (2014); Limor Shifman and Mike Thelwall, "Assessing Global Diffusion with Web Memetics: The Spread and Evolution of a Popular Joke," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60, no. 12 (2009).

<sup>116</sup> Treating information seriously, with an implicit recognition that it is physical and must have means of transport if it is to spread, makes certain questions in international politics more tractable – like whether emerging economies are likely to soon become innovation leaders (e.g., Below et al., 2014).

we must resist the natural tendency to think that ideology constitutes a separate, deviant form of social cognition that can readily be distinguished in terms of its operations from the supposedly normal, nonideological forms and mechanisms of thought that characterize everyday reasoning. The mechanisms of ideology are the mechanisms of everyday thought, which in particular contexts produce effects that are both unfortunate and unjust.<sup>117</sup>

This perspective points out the flaw in much of the use of the term “ideology”: an ideology seems to be an ideology only when it conflicts with one’s own ideology. Nonetheless, ideology has an important conceptual role to play in an information-focused, memetic view of society. It supports Marx’s insight that those with a particular class interest represent it as the general interest of society; this form of wishful thinking is supported by cognitive dissonance reduction,<sup>118</sup> the availability heuristic, conceptual imperialism, and the fallacy

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<sup>117</sup> Jack M. Balkin, *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998): 107-108.

<sup>118</sup> “[W]e can explain the mechanism of dissonance reduction in explicitly memetic terms. Each individual mind is a kind of ecology, more hospitable to some memes than to others. ... Strategies of dissonance reduction adjust beliefs and attitudes so that they can survive together in the existing ecology of the individual mind. People whose ecologies are similar – because of their common interests, their common situations, and the commonality of their previously existing beliefs – will provide similar ecologies for new memes. Thus they will tend to engage in similar strategies of dissonance reduction” (Balkin, 1998, 184).

Kate Distin also provides a memetic explanation for the evolution of cognitive dissonance reduction:

[T]he amount of effort already invested in acquiring a meme will have been entirely wasted if, whenever an alternative is encountered, the original stands as great a chance of being rejected as the novel competitor. Rather, as soon as someone has decided that one meme is worthy of his prolonged attention, a tendency to favour it would be advantageous: instead of assuming (I don’t mean consciously) that a new meme is as likely to be the correct choice as the old one, it is much more efficient for him to work on the unconscious assumption that his existing memes would not have been acquired were they not worthy of his prolonged attention. He should only acquire a novel meme if it either is compatible with the old ones or has obvious enough advantages over them to compensate for his previous investment. Such a tendency to build on what already exists would lead to stable meme assemblies, and at that point any incoming meme which contradicts one of the assembly’s elements faces even greater opposition. Rejecting the existing meme now entails rejecting the whole assembly; conversely, the incoming meme now needs to have obvious advantages over a whole complex of existing memes. Thus the very existence of the assembly increases the advantage of sticking with the existing memes, and that process in turn builds up the assembly. (Distin, 2005, 60)

of composition.<sup>119</sup> All of these, along with personal (and class) interest, are evolutionary pressures favoring one memplex-ideology over others on a macro level. On a micro level, individual facts are likely to be favored or forgotten to the extent to which they help form a grand ideological narrative that justifies one's position in society.<sup>120</sup> Of course, these are merely memetic *pressures*, not determinants. As Bertrand Russell wrote in his history of philosophy, "although social circumstances affect the philosophy of an age, individual circumstances have less influence than is sometimes thought upon the philosophy of an individual. Philosophers are usually men with a certain breadth of mind, who can largely discount the accidents of their private lives; but even they cannot rise above the larger good or evil of their time."<sup>121</sup> While all of us can potentially resist evolutionary pressures of self and class interest on our ideologies, resisting the process of adopting or fashioning an ideology out of what is available to us in our environment is another matter entirely. We are as likely to adopt an ideology that has no relation to those we encounter in our environment as giraffes are to evolve the ability to fly in a few generations.<sup>122</sup>

Just as an explanation of the evolution of ideologies requires a study of social structure, all studies of cultural evolution should include a focus on three levels of selection: natural, cultural, and social.<sup>123</sup> The latter two are purely memetic levels, but the function and effects of social structures and roles apart from culture justifies their

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<sup>119</sup> Balkin, *Cultural Software*, 178-179.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>121</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone, 1946): 261.

<sup>122</sup> "Symphony orchestras could no more have preceded chanting or singing in cultural evolution, or parliamentary democracy big-men or lineage heads in social evolution, than elephants could have preceded bacteria in biological evolution. Imagine what would happen if an archaeologist discovered a series of marks on the wall of one of the Lascaux caves alongside the depictions of animals and people which turned out to be the notation of a piece of music which could have been written by Mozart! The whole evolutionary paradigm would fall apart." (Runciman, 2009, 198)

<sup>123</sup> Hodgson and Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture*; Runciman, *The Theory*. This is in keeping with biological evolution, which also operates on multiple levels of selection (Lewontin, 1970).

separation. Three different types of behavior correspond to the three levels of selection: evoked behavior (natural) is a direct and instinctive response to a feature in the environment; acquired behavior (cultural) has been imitated or learned from another person; and imposed behavior (social) is the performance of a social role upheld by institutional inducements and sanctions. These three levels of selection are illustrated by the example of warfare, which involves:

the evoked behavior of young adult males genetically predisposed to initiate or respond to violence under arousal or provocation, the acquired behaviour of members of cultures in which violence on behalf of the in-group is positively valued and successful warriors admired, and the imposed behavior of recruits into their societies' military roles in which they are subject to formal punishments for disobedience or desertion whatever the memes acquired by imitation or learning which they are carrying inside their heads.<sup>124</sup>

The social level of selection is the most recent of the three. Only once sedentary agricultural societies arose did the need for institutional, as opposed to personal, roles arise. "As settlement sizes become larger, face-to-face relationships more tenuous, and problems of social control more severe, the need for institutional roles by which repeated interactions can be made predictable independently of purely personal characteristics becomes increasingly pressing."<sup>125</sup> The strategies used by smaller, "aggressively egalitarian," kin-based bands to keep free-riders and self-aggrandizers in check were ineffective once

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<sup>124</sup> Runciman, *The Theory*, 8-9.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

humans settled into large, sedentary groups. And this new level of social, in addition to cultural, selection creates even more complexity for memetic evolution overall.<sup>126</sup>

Meme theory may for now largely be a mere rewording of what we already know about how information develops and flows through society, but it is not heuristically trivial in the sense used by Maria Kronfeldner: a “mere superimposing of a new language on old insights.”<sup>127</sup> It is heuristically *valuable* for the reasons just discussed, and also because meme theory adds a perspective on the origin and development of human culture and the intellectual world that was missing before. Philosophy has been somewhat silent on the question of how we, a very young species, came to have so many ideas in such a short time. Parmenides argued that change is impossible, so that in a sense all ideas must have always existed; Plato believed that at least some ideas were eternal.<sup>128</sup> Descartes and Leibniz believed that some ideas are innate, which is reminiscent of Plato’s idea that knowledge is a recollection of ideas forever present in our souls.<sup>129</sup> Western philosophy has been reliant since its inception upon the concept of the “soul,” a spiritual or magical entity that exists outside of the physical realm, and is responsible for conscious thought. Owen Flanagan

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<sup>126</sup> Complexity, and absurdity and barbarity at times too:

Consider the massacre of its prisoners, women and children included, by the Covenanting army after the Battle of Philiphaugh in 1645 to the cry of ‘Jesus and no quarter!’ What can possibly explain the butchery of these innocents, who posed no conceivable threat to their killers, in the name of the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount? ... The naturally selected traits which predispose adult males to lethal violence against out-groups were combined, in this instance, with culturally selected memes drawn from an Old Testament conception of a God who enjoined his followers to smite the enemy in His name, and socially selected practices imposing soldierly obedience to orders from above. The rank-and-file of the Covenanting army many have been less motivated than the Covenanting ministers by the prospect of purging the Scottish church of prelacy in the name of ‘King Jesus’. But they obeyed them readily enough. It is a clear example of an exaptation where a mutant meme initially diffused among the disciples of a charismatic founder come [sic] to be acted out in the subsequent course of cultural and social evolution in a phenotypic behaviour-pattern directly contrary to what the charismatic founder had in mind. (Runciman, 2009, 104, references removed)

<sup>127</sup> Kronfeldner, *Darwinian Creativity*, 12.

<sup>128</sup> Russell, *A History*, 49-52, 121-122, 142; Plotkin, *Darwin Machines*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 194, 289.

explains that for most of Western history, “[m]inds and souls, not being physical, were not a proper object of scientific study”<sup>130</sup> – so they were left to the philosophers, who until recently were enjoined to reason in accordance with religious dogma, including the concept of the spiritual soul that creates ideas out of thin air. If we posit the existence of this hypothetical entity, we can facilely explain the development of a staggering array of ideas since our hunter-gatherer days in Africa. However, if we do not posit the existence of a spiritual or magical soul, then our only explanation is the human brain: and we are left with the options of either merely ascribing to the brain the abilities of the soul,<sup>131</sup> or to defer the question until (hopefully) neuroscience and psychology can answer it. Hence, to borrow from Winston Churchill on democracy, meme theory may be the worst explanation of how our species came to have such a wealth and diversity of ideas; except for all the other explanations that have been made. Not only does meme theory, and theories of cultural evolution more generally, explain the development of ideas in a manner consonant with available evidence and without resort to magic, but it is the only tentative explanation that answers, provisionally at least, the question of how our intellectual realm has come to be so densely and diversely populated.<sup>132</sup>

Meme theory also suggests an explanation for how our species came to develop such large brains with the capacity for culture and cultural evolution.<sup>133</sup> Models of evolutionary processes demonstrate that in an environment of memes with both positive and negative

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<sup>130</sup> Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2003): 2.

<sup>131</sup> This development in the European intellectual tradition applied not only to the soul and the mind, but more broadly: “[t]he distinction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘preternatural’ could now be resolved by simply absorbing within the first whatever of the second retained its credibility” (Runciman, 2009, 214).

<sup>132</sup> Liane Gabora, "Autocatalytic Closure in a Cognitive System: A Tentative Scenario for the Origin of Culture," *Psycoloquy* 9, no. 67 (1998).

<sup>133</sup> Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*; Paul Higgs, "The Mimetic Transition: a Simulation Study of the Evolution of Learning by Imitation," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 267, no. 1450 (2000).

fitness consequences, genes for increased imitative ability are progressively favored (even when such ability, if it requires larger brains, entails reduced fitness due to greater metabolic requirements and increased maternal mortality during childbirth). As imitative ability steadily increases, a “mimetic transition” tipping point is eventually reached, at which point brains have evolved an imitative capacity such that memes can spread like epidemics.<sup>134</sup> This tipping point may have been reached approximately 120,000 years ago, when evidence for cultural diversification begins to accumulate first in Africa, and then elsewhere as *Homo sapiens* spread throughout the planet.<sup>135</sup>

Also, as Kronfeldner suggests, meme theory can and is serving a bridging function between different disciplines, facilitating the cross-disciplinary study of cultural evolution.<sup>136</sup> Here is where the simplicity and all-encompassing breadth of meme theory is a strength, not a weakness: it provides a common vocabulary for varied disciplines to share information and perspectives. It also anchors cultural evolution in a metaphor with biological evolution, which – while strictly unnecessary – may help to keep the former from straying from the confines of the evolutionary algorithm.

#### **iv. Schemas**

*“[F]rom the chapter on the schematism of the pure concepts of the understanding (a chapter which, in spite of all our respect for Kant, we must call an audacious piece of nonsense) it is very clear that these categories not only contribute nothing towards intuitive perception, but*

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 1360.

<sup>135</sup> Robert A. Foley and M. Mirazón Lahr, "The Evolution of the Diversity of Cultures," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 366, no. 1567 (2011).

<sup>136</sup> Kronfeldner, *Darwinian Creativity*, 138-139.

*are very far removed from this, since there are still to be found between them and intuitive perception these quite peculiar absurdities, the schemata."*

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, Vol. 2, "Against Kant"

Schopenhauer's (typically) dour opinion of Kant's conception of the schema notwithstanding, he would probably have looked with greater favor on its modern psychological variant. After all, today's schema is a concept broad enough to roughly match Schopenhauer's own concept of the Idea or Representation.<sup>137</sup> The broadness of the schema concept makes it overlap considerably with the meme, yet in subtle but important ways, it is both narrower and more inclusive. The schema is

a generic, abstracted knowledge structure, which also contains specific instances. ... [It is] an active, constructive process, rather than a veridical copy; abstraction over instances, rather than a collection of raw data; structure based on experience, rather than determined wholly by genetic factors or by the current environment; and organization in the service of adaptive efficiency, rather than accuracy.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Although for Schopenhauer, the world as Idea was less powerful than the world as Will: "the most appropriate metaphor for the relationship of this pair is that of the strong man [Will] who is blind supporting on his shoulders the lame man [Idea] who can see" (Schopenhauer, 1995, 92). His perspective intriguingly prefigured some of the insights made in psychological research a century later:

Indeed, we are often mistaken as to our real motive in doing or not doing something, till some chance in the end reveals our secret to us, and we recognise that what we had taken to be the motive was not that one but another which we had not wanted to admit to ourselves, because it is not at all compatible with the good opinion we hold of ourselves. For example, we refrain from doing something on purely moral grounds, as we believe, but later we learn that we were restrained only by fear, for as soon as all danger is removed, we do it. In some instances this may go so far that a person does not even guess the actual motive of his action, and moreover, he does not believe himself capable of being influenced by such a motive; and yet it is the actual motive for his action. (Schopenhauer, 1995, 93)

<sup>138</sup> Susan T. Fiske and Patricia W. Linville, "What Does the Schema Concept Buy Us?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (1980): 552.



Schemas, like memes, come in as many forms as there are types of information relevant to human beings. There are fact-and-concept schemas, such as “Havana is the capital of Cuba,” and “guitars are musical instruments with a body, neck, and taut strings that vibrate”; there are person schemas, which include what we know about different people and types of people, particularly their dominant characteristics; there are self-schemas, which contain knowledge about the self along with category memberships from humanity to gender, nationality, and organizations; role schemas, which include information pertaining to behaviors expected of people in various social roles, including race and gender (e.g., “code-switching”); context schemas, which comprise predictions and suggestions for what to do in different social situations; procedure schemas, which cover the proper sequences of actions to take in different scenarios (for instance what to do when asked to propose a toast at a celebration, or after hitting the ball in a game of cricket); strategy schemas, which cover problem-solving strategies that can be used across many different contexts; and emotion schemas, which include social constructions about what emotions are and how they should be expressed in cultural context, combined with personal experiences and memory.<sup>139</sup> Thus far, memes and schemas are indistinguishable; except that memes can exist outside of human brains (in books, computers, etc.) while schemas can be said to be memes *inside* the brain.

As a psychological construct, the schema is not pure, disembodied information, but *embodied* information. As such, many schemas are inseparable from emotion: we do not just think of “fear” as an abstract concept, we think of “fear” and unavoidably *feel* it too,

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<sup>139</sup> Hiroko Nishida, “A Cognitive Approach to Intercultural Communication Based on Schema Theory,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 23, no. 5 (1999).

however fleetingly. Schemas are conceptualized, unlike memes, as laden with affect.<sup>140</sup> Like memes, schemas are largely conceptual entities, encoded in some manner in the brain but lacking a precise description of that encoding. Smith and Queller may go a bit too far in saying that “a schema is more a description of a *function* that can be performed by a learned knowledge representation, rather than a description of an actual entity inside our heads,”<sup>141</sup> but schema theory is unarguably more concerned with the processes and dynamics of knowledge representations in the brain, rather than with their neurological basis. Neither is it concerned with a theoretical narrative explaining the development and modification of schemas. In fact, it may even be correct to question the existence of schema “theory” as such.<sup>142</sup> If memetics is a theory in search of a unit of measurement, then the schema is a unit of measurement in search of a theory.

#### **v. What schemas do**

Schema theory may be weak on theory, but its empirical results are strong. The schema concept helps to explain how we process new information and guide the retrieval of stored information from memory.<sup>143</sup> For instance, reading someone’s biography and then being told that the person was a member of a social category makes us remember more information from the biography consistent with our schemas for that social category – in fact, it makes us more likely to “remember” schema-consistent information that was

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<sup>140</sup> Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill).

<sup>141</sup> Eliot R. Smith and Sarah Queller, "Mental Representations," In *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intraindividual Processes*, ed. Abraham Tesser and Norbert Schwartz, 111-133, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001): 127.

<sup>142</sup> Klaus Fielder, "Causal Schemata: Review and Criticism of Research on a Popular Construct," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42, no. 6 (1982).

<sup>143</sup> Fiske and Linville, "What Does."

actually absent from the biography. The multitude of interpretations of the Bible is a familiar example of this: merchants reading the Bible during the Protestant Reformation could have been led by their commercial schemas to focus on and remember those parts supportive of their social position, like the Parable of the Talents; while Latin American priests and nuns in the 1960s' could have been led by their schemas representing gross inequalities in society to focus on and remember those parts supportive of the poor and condemnatory toward the rich. Schemas, or the form in which our knowledge is organized, powerfully affect the way that *incoming* information is organized. In one experiment, experts and novices in baseball were asked to read a description of one half-inning in a baseball game, and then were tested for memory of the game.<sup>144</sup> Although both the baseball experts and those who knew little about baseball had similar memory ability, baseball experts were able to incorporate the information about the half-inning into their baseball schemas. As a result, they remembered more important details about the half-inning, and were better able to remember events in their correct order. The baseball novices, on the other hand, were better able only to remember peripheral details like the weather.

The effects of schemas on memory can be classified into five categories: selection, abstraction, interpretation, integration, and reconstruction.<sup>145</sup> Selection effects occur when information that is relevant (whether the information is consistent or contrary) to currently-held schemas is better remembered than irrelevant information. Abstraction effects occur when we remember only the gist of messages, rather than their full content; and the gist we tend to remember comprises information consistent with our schemas.

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<sup>144</sup> George J. Spilich et al., "Text Processing of Domain-Related Information for Individuals with High and Low Domain Knowledge," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18, no. 3 (1979).

<sup>145</sup> Asher Koriat et al., "Toward a Psychology of Memory Accuracy," *Annual Review of Psychology* 51, no. 1 (2000).

When we try to recall details of messages that do not fit into our schemas, we tend to make them up by providing inferences from our schemas. Interpretation effects occur when distortions and additions to information are encoded in memory: as we store information in memory, our schemas add sense-making suppositions and inferences above and beyond the information provided. Integration effects occur when different pieces of information are combined into a unified schema, sometimes distorting and modifying incoming information in the process. Finally, reconstruction effects occur during the process of remembering rather than encoding. They occur when we essentially fabricate memories out of whatever details we can recollect, combined with our general knowledge (or schemas) of cause, effect, intention, attitudes, and theories.

In addition to affecting memory, schemas guide our attention to stimuli. For instance, when reading the Bible, those with extensive schemas of Calvinist concepts are likely to be drawn to focus on the Parable of the Talents; whereas those with extensive schemas representing gross social inequalities are likely to be drawn to the Sermon on the Mount, or Jesus saying that camels could pass through the eye of a needle more easily than the rich can enter heaven. In focusing our attention to stimuli, schemas sometimes direct attention to schema-inconsistent information; unlike in the case of memory recall, where schemas direct attention to schema-consistent information.<sup>146</sup> Hence the Calvinist reading the eye-of-the-needle story may focus intently on it, to find a way to explain it away, and make it compatible with their schema that wealth is a sign of divine approval.

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<sup>146</sup> Fiske and Linville, "What Does," 544, 550.

Schemas can also affect learning in different ways, depending on how interconnected they are.<sup>147</sup> If our knowledge on a topic exists as isolated, unincorporated bits, then the more knowledge we have on the topic, the better able we are to learn more about it. As an illustration, imagine the sky at dusk, with only the brightest stars showing. Consider the stars as bits of information, and the knowledge-links between bits of information the imaginary links that form constellations. If we have no links between bits of information, or know no constellations, then as night falls and more stars come into view, it becomes easier to create more and more linkages: the more stars we come to see, the more varied constellations we can imagine by linking them. (They become a game of connect-the-dots, with no instructions to follow, and constellations can be created in almost any shape.) If, however, our knowledge on a topic exists as loosely-linked bits, then the more loosely-linked knowledge we have on a topic, the more it will interfere with our ability to learn more about it. In this case, our metaphorical example would be when we have a vague idea of some constellations, but we do not remember them very well. At dusk, we see only the brightest stars, and begin to recall the outlines of some constellation. As night falls, and thousands more stars come into view, we are confused by the multitude, and tracing the outlines of the constellations we vaguely know becomes more difficult (“Is that star the tip of Orion’s shield? Or is it that other one?”). Alternately, if our knowledge on a topic is tightly linked into a unified whole, then differences in the amount of those well-linked bits of knowledge will have no effect on our ability to learn more. In this case, at dusk we clearly see the outlines of the constellations we know well, even though we can

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<sup>147</sup> Susan T. Fiske and Linda M. Dyer, "Structure and Development of Social Schemata: Evidence from Positive and Negative Transfer Effects," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (1985).

only make out the brightest of the stars that make them up. As night falls, and thousands of stars come into view, we have no problem identifying which newly-revealed stars make up which constellation.

In fact, although relatively little research has been done on how schemas are developed in the first instance, it may occur in situations where incoming information is not consistent with any existing schemas, and it is important to us.<sup>148</sup> When incoming information is difficult to categorize by schemas, and it is relatively unimportant, we attempt to shoehorn it into existing schemas, modifying or distorting it somewhat in the process. However, when we encounter schema-inconsistent information that *is* important to us, we engage in more bottom-up, or data-driven, processing. In these situations, we take more time, and attend more to the details of the information rather than quickly and unconsciously categorizing it and understanding it with reference to our schemas. These may be the situations in which we create new schemas. Returning to the baseball experiment, perhaps as novices read several more descriptions of baseball innings, they will form schemas to understand the game and its rules.

## **vi. Applications of schema theory**

The schema concept has also been applied in fields other than psychology. In anthropology, schema dynamics have been used to explain how information is distorted as it is transmitted from speaker to hearer, according to the hearer's schemas (particularly those which are shared by members of a culture). In one experiment, American listeners of

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<sup>148</sup> Susan T. Fiske et al., "Category-Based and Attribute-Based Reactions to Others: Some Informational Conditions of Stereotyping and Individuating Processes," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 23, no. 5 (1987); Nishida, "A Cognitive."

Eskimo stories tended to systematically distort the stories to better fit with their cultural schemas of story structure.<sup>149</sup> This suggests an important wrinkle to the idea of memes spreading via imitation: transmitted information will be warped by the gravitational pull of recipients' schemas. In political science, schemas have been used to explain how citizens absorb political information from the media. While those with a lot of political knowledge (and well-structured political schemas reflecting their political opinions) are more resistant to having their opinions changed by new information presented in the media, those with less political knowledge are more subject to media influence.<sup>150</sup> Those with well-developed political schemas are more likely to remember schema-consistent information (like a Republican politician announcing support for a typical Republican policy like lowering taxes), but also tend to misremember information *inconsistent* with their schemas (like a Democratic politician taking stereotypically Republican, hawkish foreign policy positions).<sup>151</sup> Whether audience members have well-developed political schemas or not, the media can exert influence by withholding information and ideas that would prompt the formation of new schemas:

Whether readers accept interpretation "A," which news coverage emphasizes, or keep thinking "B" as they did before, by excluding or barely mentioning some information, the coverage may discourage audiences from thinking at all of an entirely different reading, "C." The media's omission of inferences that audiences might draw from political reality may be as important as encouraging deductions.

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<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth G. Rice, "On Cultural Schemata," *American Ethnologist* 7, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>150</sup> Robert M. Entman, "How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach," *The Journal of Politics* 51, no. 02 (1989).

<sup>151</sup> Milton Lodge and Ruth Hamill, "A Partisan Schema for Political Information Processing," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 02 (1986).

While mass audiences can ignore any conclusion that bothers them and stick to their existing beliefs, it is harder for them to come up with an interpretation on their own, one for which the media do not make relevant information readily available.<sup>152</sup>

The use of schemas in anthropology and political science has also drawn criticism, ranging from the overbreadth of the schema concept, to the insufficient breadth of schemas for encompassing power relations.<sup>153</sup> For what they are worth, the same criticisms could apply to similar uses of meme theory.

Schema research began with investigations into text comprehension, and found that readers use considerable amounts of prior knowledge in their understanding of narrative prose. Reading research has profitably used the schema concept to design educational practices to facilitate reading comprehension.<sup>154</sup> As one second-language (L2) reading researcher wrote at the end of the '80s: "Every L2 study published confirms the theory that familiarity with schema will facilitate reading comprehension. Prior familiarity with subject matter enhances language recognition, concept recall, and inferential reasoning. Moreover, the more sophisticated that knowledge, the higher the comprehension."<sup>155</sup> In fact, researchers applying schema theory to L2 reading comprehension found that teaching students to incorporate foreign words into previously-held schemas (in their native language) was twice as effective as mere definition-memorizing in learning new vocabulary. If students are first taught to absorb the schemas underlying a text, they can

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<sup>152</sup> Entman, "How the Media Affect," 367.

<sup>153</sup> Dorothy Holland, "The Woman Who Climbed up the House: Some Limitations of Schema Theory," in *New Directions in Psychological Anthropology*, ed. Theodore Schwartz et al., 68-80 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); James H. Kuklinski et al., "Where Is the Schema? Going Beyond the "S" Word in Political Psychology," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 04 (1991); Clyde Wilcox and Leonard Williams, "Taking Stock of Schema Theory," *The Social Science Journal* 27, no. 4 (1990).

<sup>154</sup> Mary B. McVee et al., "Schema Theory Revisited," *Review of Educational Research* 75, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>155</sup> Janet K. Swaffar, "Readers, Texts, and Second Languages: The Interactive Processes," *The Modern Language Journal* 72, no. 2 (1988): 126, references removed.



better absorb the text – better even than reading a syntactically less complex version of the same text without first learning relevant schemas.<sup>156</sup>

Reading research has since moved beyond schema theory to design educational practices that account for the greater complexity of processes involved.<sup>157</sup> These practices draw in part from the insights of Lev Vygotsky, emphasizing the social and political nature of schema construction. Hence teachers must be cognizant of the role of schemas as “embodied social and cultural constructs that mediate students’ learning. ... [S]chemas can assist a learner in accessing relevant knowledge, or culturally situated schemas may cause confusion or even precipitate resistance.”<sup>158</sup> It is the *embodied*<sup>159</sup> nature of schemas that neurological research is beginning to describe, by showing how schemas are distributed representations drawing on specific memories and emotions.<sup>160</sup> And it is this embodied nature of schemas (and memes) which calls to mind Vygotsky’s insight: “[t]he sense of a word ... is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole...”<sup>161</sup>

If memes were considered to be only those chunks of information existing inside human brains in the form of distributed neuronal networks, then memes and schemas would be functionally equivalent.<sup>162</sup> But schema research, by focusing on more salient and

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Hossein Nassaji, "Schema Theory and Knowledge-Based Processes in Second Language Reading Comprehension: A Need for Alternative Perspectives," *Language Learning* 52, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>158</sup> McVee et al., "Schema Theory," 550-551.

<sup>159</sup> This is “embodied” in a sense opposite to that of an abstract, ethereal idea being considered by a soul, or a meme in two different heads being perfectly similar; that schemas are “embodied” points to the unavoidably idiosyncratic nature of information encoded in the human brain and connected to one’s physical and social environments.

<sup>160</sup> Kiefer and Pulvermüller, “Conceptual Representations.”

<sup>161</sup> Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Boston: MIT Press, 1986): 146.

<sup>162</sup> Or, if we distinguish memes stored internally in the brain (i-memes) from memes stored externally in a medium such as books or computers (e-memes), then i-memes would be the equivalent of schemas (McNamara, 2011).

relevant bits of information of small to intermediate size, and by illustrating the dynamics affecting our use, processing, and storage of information, elaborates on the rather sparse picture painted by much meme theory. As Elizabeth Rice explains, schemas “represent more than mere descriptive devices; ‘schema theory’ is a theory of the comprehension process. Considerable research has already been undertaken into the role of [schemas] in the assimilation of information, in information storage and memory, and in recall and reconstruction.”<sup>163</sup> Hence, schema and meme theory may be fruitfully combined: the evolutionary dynamics of memes on the one hand, and the psychological dynamics of schemas on the other. The meme foregrounds the informational and evolutionary nature of knowledge, and the schema foregrounds how such information is processed by our not-computer-like brains, explaining an essential part of the ecology in which memes evolve.

## **vii. Social Representations**

*“[A] social representation is not a quiet thing consisting of an object and a science and the transformation of that object. Usually, there is [a] kind of ideological battle, a battle of ideas... what is very much lacking in social psychology today is concern with the strife of ideas.”*

- Serge Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, “Ideas and Their Development”

Like both schema and meme theory, social representations theory has been criticized for being overbroad, “mushy,” and imprecise, hence of little use.<sup>164</sup> A similar

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<sup>163</sup> Rice, “On Cultural,” 155.

<sup>164</sup> Gustav Jahoda, “Critical Notes and Reflections on ‘Social Representations’,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18, no. 3 (1988); Jonathan Potter and Ian Litton, “Some Problems Underlying the Theory of Social Representations,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 24, no. 2 (1985).

critique of “they merely describe, but do not explain” seems to shadow each of these three very different yet related (though not explicitly) perspectives. This may be less a weakness of the theories, and more a truism about the inherent difficulty of subjecting the world of information in society to scientific scrutiny. Before delving into the theory of social representations on its own, it may be helpful to first explore its commonalities with and points of departure from schema theory.

Both schema and social representations theory concern information that is social in nature;<sup>165</sup> that is, information which is generated by and relevant to social interactions.<sup>166</sup> (Schema theory, like meme theory, also includes non-socially relevant information; but unlike meme theory, its main focus is on information that has effects in social encounters.) Social representations also share with schemas a conceptualization as information in memory with an organizational structure, the use of cognitive short-cuts or heuristics, and an affective, emotional dimension. These similarities are to be expected, given the *mélange* of ideas and processes social representations takes as its focus. Social representations is an “open” theory which welcomes a diversity of methodologies, and can be described as an all-encompassing concept, as it includes other psychological concepts like values and attitudes.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Bartlett’s original conception of the schema was profoundly *social*, and has more in common with social representations than the modern-day cognitivist conception of the schema (Augoustinos and Innes, 1991, 218-219).

<sup>166</sup> Martha Augoustinos and John Michael Innes, "Towards an Integration of Social Representations and Social Schema Theory," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 29, no. 3 (1990); Jorge Vala, "Representações Sociais para uma Psicologia Social do Pensamento Social," in *Psicologia Social*, ed. Jorge Vala and Maria Benedicta Monteiro, 353-384 (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1993).

<sup>167</sup> Martha Augoustinos, "The Openness and Closure of a Concept: Reply to Allansdottir, Jovelovitch and Stathopoulou," *Papers on Social Representations* 2, no. 1 (1993).

The structure and function of schemas and social representations are also similar.<sup>168</sup> Schemas are organized around an exemplar or prototype, and social representations center around a nucleus or core. Both have effects outside of conscious awareness: schemas can shape or distort incoming information, and social representations can affect judgment without thinking – in much the same way that ‘common sense’ is rarely examined.<sup>169</sup> There are, however, fundamental differences between the two concepts, particularly in scope. While schema theory encompasses more of the realm of information than social representations (due to the latter’s restricted focus on socially-generated, -shared, and -efficacious information), social representations theory encompasses more of the psychological realm. For social representations, all psychological phenomena are of explanatory interest to explain how socially-shared information is formed and affects society.<sup>170</sup> Every bit of information that comprises a social representation is also a schema; but some bits of information that comprise schemas may not be part of any social representation. On the other hand, the social psychology of in-group bias or system justification theory are outside of the scope of schema theory, but can form part of an explanation of how a social representation operates in society. Therefore, in terms of how much of the realm of information they treat, schemas are more encompassing than social

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<sup>168</sup> Martha Augoustinos et al., *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction* (New York: Sage, 2006).

<sup>169</sup> Michael Billig, *Ideology and Opinions: Studies in Rhetorical Psychology* (New York: Sage, 1991).

<sup>170</sup> This is so, even if at times social psychological phenomena are given an alternative interpretation in social representations. For instance:

[T]he so-called ‘fundamental attribution error’, the tendency to attribute causality to the disposition of the person rather than to situational factors, may not simply be an error of judgment. ... [I]ts pervasiveness suggests that it is shaped by a strong individualist ideological tradition in western societies, or *social representation* which views the person as being the centre of all cognition, action and process. Thus, Moscovici does not view these errors in simple rationalist cognitivist terms, but as grounded in dominant preconceptions shared by collectivities. (Augoustinos et al., 2006, 96, references removed)

representations; but social representations encompass more of the psychological and social, and permit a broader range of methodologies.

More fundamental yet is the difference between the individual and social levels of focus.<sup>171</sup> As Augoustinos and Innes explain:

[T]he major difference between the study of social representations and social schemata is that whereas schema theory is essentially an information-processing model articulated at the intra-personal level of explanation, the theory of social representations is much more than this. Unlike social schema research, social representations research does not limit itself to the study of simple cognitive structures but is predominantly concerned with complex cognitive structures such as belief systems and cultural value patterns. As such, it is a much more ambitious theory necessitating multidisciplinary endeavours.<sup>172</sup>

There are two differences here between the individual and social level of focus. First, social representations theory concerns only socially-shared groups of interrelated ideas, while schema theory focuses on individual, potentially idiosyncratic knowledge structures. Second, this socially-shared nature necessitates a much larger fundamental unit than the schema. For instance, small chunks of information comprising simple ideas like “bicycle” or “chess” may be of interest in schema theory, but social representations theory concerns much larger chunks of information, like belief systems, cultural values, political concepts, even ideologies.

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<sup>171</sup> Wolfgang Wagner and Nicky Hayes, *Everyday Discourse and Common Sense: The Theory of Social Representations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>172</sup> Augoustinos and Innes, “Towards an Integration,” 227.

Social representations theory also helps to fill in a gap left by schema research: how knowledge representations are formed in the first place.<sup>173</sup> The individualistic focus of schema theory might imply that as we pass from childhood to adulthood, we generate knowledge based on our own experiences; but this is intuitively unsatisfying. Social representations theory (like meme theory) instead posits that the shared understandings and knowledge of our society are transmitted to us over the course of our development, rather than generated individually.

### **viii. What social representations do**

But enough of comparing social representations with schemas; let us look at the former in the book that first explained the theory. In 1961, Serge Moscovici introduced his theory of social representations in a study of psychoanalysis and how it was represented among different segments of French society. The methodological pluralism (interviews, surveys, media content analysis) in this original study has characterized the field of social representations research ever since.<sup>174</sup> This case study was used to elaborate a theory not only of psychoanalysis, or of other scientific paradigms, but of all social representations whatever their content: scientific, ideological, political, cultural, etc. Although Moscovici was somewhat reticent to provide a straightforward, complete definition of a social

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<sup>173</sup> Augoustinos et al., *Social Cognition*, 99-101.

<sup>174</sup> Caroline Howarth et al., "Editorial: 50 Years of Research on Social Representations: Central Debates and Challenging Questions," *Papers on Social Representations* 20 (2011); Wolfgang Wagner et al., "Theory and Method of Social Representations," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2, no. 1 (1999). As Moscovici recently argued for the importance of methodological pluralism for social psychology:

[F]ixing the limits and character, as some tend to do, of social psychology, which is the most recent and most necessary of human sciences, is like fixing the character of physics once for all in the seventeenth century when electricity and magnetism were first discovered. A science practised by a large number of researchers with a variety of talents must have the chance of remaining on the boil, flexible and unstable. (Moscovici, 2012, 76)

representation, he explains more clearly what they *do*: they simplify and standardize sciences, ideologies, value systems, political philosophies and the like, whose full informational content may be only barely known by the masses, thereby “[r]esolving problems, giving social interactions a form, and supplying a mould for behaviors...”<sup>175</sup> In other words, social representations are widely-disseminated, abridged versions of scientific disciplines, theories, or discoveries, or political and economic theories and ideologies. In their full form, the latter are all interrelated complexes of ideas comprising massive amounts of information, while their social representation variants (which are much more common among members of a society) all significantly economize on information. In some cases, these abridged versions are faithful to the core or gist of that which they represent; sometimes, they are significantly distorted.

In a later article, Moscovici offered a broader definition focusing on function: “Social representation is defined as the elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating.”<sup>176</sup> Wagner and Hayes provide a more comprehensive, two-part definition of a social representation as the

(a) structured, (b) cognitive, affective, evaluative and operative, (c) metaphorical or iconic ‘portrayal’, of (d) socially relevant phenomena. These can be ‘events’, ‘stimuli’ or ‘facts’ (e) of which individuals are potentially aware and which are (f) shared by other members of the social group. The commonality between people represents (g) a fundamental element of the social identity of the individual. ... Second, the term

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<sup>175</sup> Serge Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public* (New York: Polity, 2008): 32.

<sup>176</sup> Serge Moscovici, "Attitudes and Opinions," *Annual Review of Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1963): 251.

‘social representation’ identifies the process of the origin, change and elaboration of the iconic portrayal of things in the discourse of social groups...”<sup>177</sup>

Most importantly, the abridged, widely-disseminated versions (social representations) of large bodies of information like scientific theories and political ideologies exercise at least as much social power as the theories or ideologies in their “pure” form. Moscovici emphasized:

the representation, and the attention it draws to psychological, physical or collective phenomena by functioning as a framework for the interpretation of those phenomena, becomes one of the constituent factors of reality and social relations. ... [T]hose relations and that reality are not ‘concrete’ on the one hand and ‘represented’ on the other. Their interweaving is total, and the analytic distinction between the two is fragmentary and artificial.<sup>178</sup>

For example, of what value is the distinction between the social representation of Catholicism – Catholicism as understood by large social groups – and Catholicism “proper” as understood by a theologian? The theologian would likely see more than an artificial distinction, but a social psychologist interested in organized collections of ideas on a population level would not. The “proper” view of Catholicism would entail a rejection of birth control, for instance; but the social representation of Catholicism as it actually exists among a majority of Catholics in the United States does not. Hence, for social psychologists interested in what socially-shared knowledge *does*, the distinction between the ‘represented’ and the ‘reality’ is of peripheral interest.

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<sup>177</sup> Wagner and Hayes, *Everyday Discourse*, 120, 123.

<sup>178</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, 32.



Moscovici also describes two processes involved in the genesis of social representations: objectification and anchoring. Objectification occurs when the abstract concepts of a science or ideology are made concrete, like when the complexes and neuroses of psychoanalysis became commonly understood by considering them as diseases, just of a psychological sort. Anchoring occurs when such abstract concepts are inserted into a society's hierarchy of values, changing the way things are *done*. In the case of psychoanalysis, this took the form of changes in childrearing, in how people conceptualized their personal problems and how to solve them, and, in the case of a priest, how to conduct the rite of confession and apportion moral responsibility.

Apart from how these socially-shared representations develop, Moscovici examined three broad patterns in how representations are spread via the media. (The media are a natural target for the study of the spread of ideas, particularly socially-shared ideas; no other force in society can match the media in distributing information *en masse* to the masses.)<sup>179</sup> These patterns corresponded to the ideologies and goals of the media sources themselves vis-à-vis the social representation they were spreading. For the mainstream

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<sup>179</sup> The primacy of the media was nothing Moscovici felt needed to be argued at any length in his first exposition of social representations theory. In Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*, the book that provided Moscovici's "Eureka!" moment (de Rosa, 2012a, 3), the problem of media power is elaborated in strident terms:

It is only in the large community, where the Lords of Things as They Are protect themselves from hunger by wealth, from public opinion by privacy and anonymity, from private criticism by the laws of libel and the possession of the means of communication, that ruthlessness can reach its most sublime levels. Of all of these anti-homeostatic factors in society, the control of the means of communication is the most effective and most important.... Thus on all sides we have a triple constriction of the means of communication: the elimination of the less profitable means in favor of the more profitable; the fact that these means are in the hands of the very limited class of wealthy men, and thus naturally express the opinions of that class; and the further fact that, as one of the chief avenues to political and personal power, they attract above all those ambitious for such power. That system which more than all others should contribute to social homeostasis is thrown directly into the hands of those most concerned in the game of power and money, which we have already seen to be one of the chief anti-homeostatic elements in the community. (Wiener, 1948, 187-188)

commercial press in France, psychoanalysis did not pose any particular threat; rather, it was something of increasing interest in intellectual circles, and could be used to attract the attention of their potential customers. Their approach to spreading a social representation of psychoanalysis Moscovici termed “diffusion,” a relatively conservative process characterized by neutrality, a lack of clear intentions, and no sustained orientation. The Catholic Church and its press organs, on the other hand, viewed psychoanalysis as threatening in some respects, and assimilable in others. The way the Church disseminated a social representation of psychoanalysis was termed “propagation”: its goal was to integrate psychoanalysis into its own frame of reference, and attempt to sway society into adopting its preferred representation. Lastly, the Communist Party of France and its press organs viewed psychoanalysis as an inassimilable threat: not only did psychoanalysis deny the materialist basis of reality with its mystical constructs, but it explained social ills not as the result of class exploitation, but of individual maladaptation to a presumably healthy society; furthermore, its popularity in the imperialist United States suggested it was a device to extend bourgeois hegemony. Therefore, the way the Communist press disseminated its own social representation of psychoanalysis Moscovici labeled “propaganda”, defined as an action- and goal-oriented elaboration of one group’s representation of an object of a conflict.<sup>180</sup> The Communist Party attempted to disseminate

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<sup>180</sup> Moscovici’s analysis of propaganda suggests a resolution to the bygone debate in media research between the ‘hypodermic needle’ approach (whose proponents were rightly concerned with the power of the media after witnessing its use by European and Japanese fascists) and the ‘minimal effects’ paradigm (whose proponents, on the basis of studies of media exposure and vote choice in American elections, believed the media to have very little power):

If ... iteration is to be successful, tautological repetition must first ‘install’ the cognitive structure, and its ability to do so is dependent upon situational factors in the personal life of the receiver, or on the adequacy of the representation’s elements for a certain existing reality. We can conclude that it is only because it is grounded in this way that quantitative iteration can succeed in making action possible. The success of propaganda does not, in other words, depend solely

a representation of psychoanalysis that mirrored its own: that of a false, dangerous pseudoscience.

### **ix. Social representations in political psychology**

*“When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them.”*

- Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*

Since the publication of *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public*, social representations theory has developed and the research it has inspired has grown in many directions. This can be considered somewhat surprising, considering that paradigms in social psychology tend to have relatively short shelf lives. Moscovici deplored the fact that: Social psychology changes its “paradigm” about every ten years. And there is not the least continuity from one paradigm to the next, for that matter; and yet no revolutionary break has taken place either. It is not even true that the new paradigm overcomes the difficulties of its predecessor or that a crucial experiment has knocked a hole in it. Each paradigm

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upon the repetition of a stereotype, but also upon the structuration of the content that makes the behavior necessary. (Moscovici, 2008, 332)

Hence both camps are right, in a way: the media do have tremendous power over the public mind, but its exercise is not a simple matter of repetition. To have anywhere near the power feared by proponents of the hypodermic needle model, the media must disseminate (and repeat) representations that are adequate to persuade people, given the social reality in which they live (or, their memetic environment).

enters boldly and leaves quietly by the back of the stage, once it no longer arouses any curiosity. So what we have are not unique paradigms but lonely ones, deprived of real antecedents or successors.<sup>181</sup>

Meanwhile, social representations theory “has become not only one of the most enduring theoretical contributions in social psychology, but also one that is widely diffused across the world.”<sup>182</sup> Part of its appeal is that it emphasizes the *social* in social psychology, whereas so much work in social psychology emphasizes the workings of individual cognition in social situations.<sup>183</sup> Calling it a sociological psychology might not be far from the mark:

The central and exclusive object of social psychology should be the study of all that pertains to *ideology* and to *communication* from the point of view of their structure, their genesis and their function. The proper domain of our discipline is the study of cultural processes which are responsible for the organization of knowledge in a society, for the establishment of inter-individual relationships in the context of social and physical environment, for the formation of social movements (groups, parties, institutions) through which men act and interact, [and] for the codification of inter-individual and intergroup conduct which creates a common social reality with its norms and values, the origin of which is to be sought again in the social context.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Serge Moscovici, "The Myth of the Lonely Paradigm: A Rejoinder," *Social Research* 51, no. 4 (1984): 940.

<sup>182</sup> Gerard Duveen, "Introduction: The Power of Ideas," in *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, ed. Gerard Duveen, 1-17 (New York: NYU Press, 2001): 10.

<sup>183</sup> "[Q]uite apart from its technical merits, experiment has come to stand for the exclusive association of social psychology with general psychology and for its departure from sociology and the social sciences. Doubtless such was not the intention of its founders, but that is the way in which it has evolved. Furthermore, its syllabi of research and teaching turn out psychological experts who are sociological ignoramuses." (Moscovici, 2001, 75-76)

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

In an explanation of the importance of a social representations approach to political psychology, Elcheroth and colleagues pointedly observe that “what shapes social behavior is shared social knowledge.”<sup>185</sup> In other words, information is what shapes social, including political, behavior, and makes social life what it is. The social representations perspective implies a profound respect for the power of “mere” ideas in people’s heads. And it is a recognition that what gives ideas power is their shared, social nature – and the individual knowledge of the fact that they are shared.<sup>186</sup> “The biblical writer was already aware of this when he asserted that the word became flesh; and Marxism confirms it when it states that ideas, once released amongst the masses, are, and behave like, material forces.”<sup>187</sup>

A brief tour of studies on social representations gives a concrete idea of the theory and its fruits. Research in social representations covers a broad array of thematic areas, from health and illness, gender and family roles, identity, culture, environment, and deviance, to communication and media, politics and ideology, and economics, work, and organizations.<sup>188</sup> Methodological approaches also vary, including field, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and experimental research – oftentimes studies integrate more than one methodology.

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<sup>185</sup> Guy Elcheroth et al., “On the Knowledge of Politics and the Politics of Knowledge: How a Social Representations Approach Helps Us Rethink the Subject of Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology* 32, no. 5 (2011): 736.

<sup>186</sup> The importance for social representations of the ideas in people’s heads is made clear in a comparison with the concept of habitus:

Whilst habitus is inferred from data which were gained by anthropological field methods and surveys, as being a structured quantity of tacit rules such as preferences, taste and behavioural practices; research on social representations largely, but not exclusively takes what individuals talk and do more literally. A social representation on this understanding does not exceed the potentially aware knowledge of people. (Wagner and Hayes, 2005, 270)

<sup>187</sup> Moscovici, *Social Representations*, 32-33.

<sup>188</sup> Annamaria S. de Rosa, “Research Fields in Social Representations: Snapshot Views From a Meta-Theoretical Analysis,” in *Social Representations in the “Social Arena”*, ed. Annamaria S. de Rosa, 89-124 (New York: Routledge, 2012b).

In a study of social representations of economic issues, the unemployed tended not to identify their own plight with other unemployed people; rather, they made a distinction between the unemployed as a group (who are jobless as a result of unwillingness to work, unreasonable demands, and the like) and their own individual situation (joblessness due to outside factors).<sup>189</sup> This illustrates the difficulty the jobless face in organizing politically to protect their interests and improve their situation: their representation of the unemployed as a group is thoroughly negative, and does not even include themselves in it. A study of social representations about capitalism in Western versus (formerly socialist) Eastern European nations found intriguing differences between the two.<sup>190</sup> For instance, representations of “the market” in Britain and France had prominent positive (allowing freedom) and negative connotations (imposing one’s will on others), while representations in the formerly-socialist Czech Republic and Poland had more uniformly positive connotations. Overall, the study detailed interesting correlations between countries’ historical experiences with a capitalist economy, and their people’s social representations of it.

A study of social representations of the left-right political divide in Italy found that, contrary to theories of the ‘end of ideology’ and depoliticization, the left-right divide has become *more* salient over time, more abstract and class-based, and less concrete and party-based.<sup>191</sup> A study of social representations in Israel described the development of a “siege

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<sup>189</sup> Erich Kirchler and Erik Hoelzlde, “Social Representations and Economic Psychology,” in *Social Representations in the “Social Arena”*, ed. Annamaria S. de Rosa, 223-232 (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>190</sup> Vergès, Pierre and Raymond Rybade, “Social Representations of the Economy,” in *Social Representations in the “Social Arena”*, edited by Annamaria S. de Rosa, 233-241 (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>191</sup> Piergiorgio Corbetta et al., “Between Ideology and Social Representations: Four Theses Plus (a New) One on the Relevance and the Meaning of the Political Left and Right,” *European Journal of Political Research* 48, no. 5 (2009).

mentality” deriving from representations of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, which influenced the interpretation of Arab states’ hostility to Israel (“it is similar to the preconditions for the Holocaust”) and of the rest of the world’s support for the Palestinians (“it is similar to historical forms of anti-Semitism”).<sup>192</sup> The acutely-felt need for security produces a selective receptivity to information; existing knowledge remains frozen, and unable to absorb information about the Palestinians’ parallel needs for security. Hence calls for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state are viewed from the siege mentality as the first step in an encirclement and ultimate destruction of Israel. A study on the constitution of social representations analyzed how the official “Tismăneanu Report” condemning Communism in Romania tried to shape the ideological contours of the subject, and fix in place a particular social representation of history.<sup>193</sup> Across national and cultural contexts, social representations of history powerfully influence how people will react to new political developments.<sup>194</sup>

Lastly, another study applied a social representations approach to explain how Slobodan Milosevic’s government was able to create an atmosphere of ethnic distrust and fear, leading to war.<sup>195</sup> Shortly before war broke out in 1991, social representations of ethnicity in the former Yugoslavia had been characterized by generally positive views of ‘the other,’ particularly in the most multiethnic regions. However, what mattered were not individual attitudes, or even the aggregate of individual attitudes – what mattered were

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<sup>192</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal and Dikla Antebi, "Siege Mentality in Israel," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 16, no. 3 (1992).

<sup>193</sup> Christian Tileagă, "The Social Organization of Representations of History: The Textual Accomplishment of Coming to Terms with the Past," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>194</sup> James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, "How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>195</sup> Elcheroth et al., "On the Knowledge."

social representations about interethnic hostility. At first, media campaigns to foster and stoke interethnic tensions were treated skeptically. But as politically-organized violence began to *create* what before propaganda had only *claimed*, people were faced with the choice of relying on their individual representations of the ethnic 'other,' or basing their actions on newly dominant *social* representations influenced by propaganda and political action. Social representations radically changed the individual calculus:

from an individual point of view, the cost of getting it wrong in one way (i.e., expecting outgroups to be *less* hostile and ingroups to be *more* tolerant than they actually are) can be dramatically higher than to getting [sic] it wrong the other way around. Uncertainty thus plays against intergroup benevolence, and individuals have better chances to be on the safer side when they behave on the basis of assumptions that thereby, paradoxically, will contribute to create a tenser, and eventually more dangerous, situation for everyone. ... In such a climate, what people guess about their mutual mental states, ironically, becomes much more real *in its consequences* than what each of them "really" thinks and feels. And it might then only take a few incidents to trigger a tragic escalation of violence, which, from the outside, is too easily misinterpreted as a "spontaneous" release of genuine intergroup hatred or other collective emotions...<sup>196</sup>

As these examples show, social representations theory is a natural fit for political psychology. Political battles today are largely won and lost in the public sphere, where

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 752.



information is power, public opinion is the judge, and the winners are those whose version of reality is predominant.<sup>197</sup> As Caroline Howarth explains,

[c]ertain groups have different degrees of access to the public sphere and have different means with which to present and/or contest particular claims to ‘the real’ ... Those who ‘win’ the battle over meaning and so the social construction of reality ... are those whose versions of reality are, or come to be, reified and legitimized as what is socially accepted as ‘reality’.<sup>198</sup>

While individualist, cognitivist research (including research on genetic correlates with political opinions) certainly has its place, the social nature of politics requires a psychology emphasizing the social. And social representations theory provides just that: a methodologically diverse psychology prioritizing the social.<sup>199</sup>

## **x. Memes and schemas in social representations:**

### **A synthetic theory for political psychology**

*“When one looks at the variety of representations in existence, one is struck by two things: man's obstinate rediscovery and reiteration of the same themes and his extraordinary prolificness in inventing ideas, urged on by a poetic instinct. A troubling phenomenon, for it sometimes looks as though neither society nor the individual were in full control of this invention. Perhaps an intrinsic power of the mind has been unleashed.”*

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<sup>197</sup> This turn in the evolution of human societies was recognized during the Renaissance by Machiavelli, who wrote: “Now it is more necessary to princes, except the Turk and the Sultan, to satisfy the people rather than the soldiers, for the people are more powerful.” (Quoted in Wollin, 2004, 205)

<sup>198</sup> Caroline Howarth, “A Social Representation Is Not a Quiet Thing: Exploring the Critical Potential of Social Representations Theory,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45(1) (2006): 75.

<sup>199</sup> Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell, “Social Representations Theory: A Progressive Research Programme for Social Psychology,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 38, no. 4 (2008); Elcheroth et al., “On the Knowledge.”

-Serge Moscovici, "The Myth of the Lonely Paradigm: A Rejoinder"

As we have already seen, schema and social representations theory share some similarities. So too does meme theory have much in common with both. All three are theories of information, with meme theory being almost exclusively focused on pure information, schema theory focusing on information plus individual psychology, and social representations focusing on information and social psychology. Social representations theory is, of the three, the most concerned with the effects of ideas on people and society, while meme theory tends to be so taken with a vision of ideas themselves as evolving abstract-entities-cum-agents that social structure and dynamics tend to fade from view.<sup>200</sup> As an evolutionary explanation of how humans evolved such a diverse and immense intellectual universe, the meme's eye view<sup>201</sup> may be breathtaking; but it can be hard to make out just what is going on in society.

In fact, what Moscovici wrote about the schema could just as well be applied to the meme: "it refers to a simplified representation and is less rooted in the social world."<sup>202</sup> The theory he introduced, and which has been elaborated by numerous researchers since, excludes from its scope ideas which are too rare, unincorporated into any meaningful

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<sup>200</sup> Garry Runciman's meme-based theory of social and cultural selection is among the exceptions to this overall tendency.

<sup>201</sup> Adam Lynch clearly described the meme's eye view, or memeticist's perspective, using the following comparison:

If a denomination expands, the sociologist usually asks what sort of advantages attract all the newcomers. The memeticist, on the other hand, studies the denomination's creed with an eye toward how it evolves and furthers its own replication. ... As a pragmatic matter, memeticists usually explore the aspects of belief propagation not already covered by sociologists. The two fields thus make their own distinct contributions to understanding religion and other social phenomena. (Lynch, 1996, 22)

<sup>202</sup> Serge Moscovici, "Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18, no. 3 (1988): 215.

whole, or uninfluential to have any social significance. As Wagner and Hayes put it, social representations are “holomorphic” – individual instances are functionally related as a part of the whole in a society – while individual representations can be “idiomorphic”, idiosyncratic and largely unshared ideas held by individuals.<sup>203</sup> All social representations are composed of memes, but not all memes comprise a social representation. The ideas Jesus had were merely memes at the start of his career; but after his death, the memes spread by him and his disciples came to form a social representation which has spread and evolved dramatically since.

Other than this, meme theory and social representations share some profound similarities. Owing to their common core as information, both memes and social representations can exist in human minds as well as in recording media. “While representations are often to be located in the minds of men and women, they can just as often be found ‘in the world’, and as such examined separately. Representations can be preserved on parchment or stone...”<sup>204</sup> – and, one could add, in books, hard drives, digital screens, and internet servers. Another striking similarity between the two is that social representations are dynamic, mobile, plastic and interdependent<sup>205</sup> – a description perfectly consonant with the concept of memes in their ecology.

The rest of the similarities between meme and social representations theory could be described as genetic (if the reader will excuse what will be revealed to be a pun). While describing the genesis of his concept of social representations in *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and its Public*, Moscovici introduced Kenneth Boulding’s *The Image* as “a fascinating little

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<sup>203</sup> Wagner and Hayes, *Everyday Discourse*, 278, 281.

<sup>204</sup> Moscovici, “Notes Towards,” 214.

<sup>205</sup> Moscovici, *Social Representations*.

book,”<sup>206</sup> and went on to summarize Boulding’s “image” concept.<sup>207</sup> Boulding’s “image” is essentially a meme, only without the evolutionary theory. In fact, in illustrating the “image” concept, Boulding anticipated Richard Dawkins’ meme-gene analogy by a decade:

[T]he artifacts, that is, the physical capital of a society must be regarded as the result of the structuring of the material substance by an image. There is a close analogy here between the image and the gene. The production of an automobile is a process whereby certain parts of the material structure of the earth are arranged into the form of a previous image. The genetics of the automobile is, of course, much more complicated than that of the horse. It is multisexual and, unlike the gene, the image does not merely exhibit random mutation but has a regular systematic and accumulative mode of change. Nevertheless, it is by no means fanciful to argue that the automobile and other human artifacts are produced as a result of a genetic process in which an image plays somewhat the same role as the gene does in the biological world.<sup>208</sup>

Therefore, social representations, like meme theory, can partially trace its heritage to an analogy with the gene. Although after introducing the “image” Moscovici went on to distinguish social representations from it, its imprint is clear from a subsequent passage eerily reminiscent of meme theory: “It is as though they [expert accounts in the form of

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<sup>206</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, 7.

<sup>207</sup> In describing the early days of social representations theory and the central role the “image” played, de Rosa explains that “Moscovici did not replace the more common term of ‘image’ with that of ‘social representation’”. In this regard, Jean Claude Abric has repeatedly said, referring to the time when Moscovici’s theory began to circulate among his colleagues, “*we still said image!*” (de Rosa, 2012a, 21)

<sup>208</sup> Kenneth Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961): 58.

“articles, books, lectures, etc.”] were genes and atoms that circulate in our images, words and arguments.”<sup>209</sup>

Meme theory also shares another genetic commonality with social representations: both were influenced by the development of information theory. Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics* was a profound early influence on Moscovici’s thought, and traces of information theory left indelible marks on the introductory text of social representations theory. For instance, Moscovici accurately described analogies as a way of “economizing on information,” justified by the demands of communication.<sup>210</sup> This echoes the focus of information theorists on devising ways of encoding more information in ever smaller packages.<sup>211</sup>

A final genetic commonality between meme theory and social representations<sup>212</sup> lies in their relationship with Gabriel Tarde, and his laws of imitation. Tarde’s theory may be considered a forerunner of meme theory,<sup>213</sup> or as a superior version, lacking its flaws.<sup>214</sup> Social representations also has points in common with Tarde’s theory, as Rob Farr explains:

Moscovici does not accept the social determinism of classic Durkheimian theory. He is, in this respect, much closer to the social psychology of Gabriel Tarde, one of the other founding fathers of French social science. Whilst Tarde, perhaps, is best known for drawing the attention of social psychologists to the key role of imitation

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<sup>209</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, 11.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>211</sup> Pierce, *An Introduction*.

<sup>212</sup> Another, trivial, commonality between social representations and meme theory is that they have both been criticized by Gustav Jahoda along similar lines (Jahoda, 2002; 1988).

<sup>213</sup> Marsden, “Forefathers.”

<sup>214</sup> Hans Bernhard Schmid, “Evolution by Imitation: Gabriel Tarde and the Limits of Memetics,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2004).

in social influence he also stressed the importance of invention and of creativity. Individuals are often the *agents* of change in society. Once an innovation has occurred, then, the laws of imitation [a precursor of meme theory] might help to account for the distinctive pattern of its adoption. This links up with Sperber's ideas about the transmission of representations.<sup>215</sup>

One last example from Moscovici suggests a third, methodological commonality between social representations and meme theory: "Like the radioactive bodies used in biology, it [core terms within a representation, like "complex" in psychoanalysis] can act as a veritable 'tracer' that detects the circulation of psychoanalytically derived language or its volume."<sup>216</sup> This evokes the methodology used to study the evolutionary dynamics of memes in internet discussion forums by tracing word clusters linked to an idea or topic of discussion.<sup>217</sup>

As Figure 1 illustrates, in the realm of all total information (including not only human knowledge but computer data, artifacts, etc.), meme, schema, and social representations theories respectively cover a progressively smaller proportion of the overall total. As Figure 2 illustrates, in the realm of all social phenomena (cultural, economic, political, etc.), meme, schema, and social representations theories respectively cover a progressively *larger* proportion of the overall total. Hence the more complete and satisfying explanations of the flow of information, evolution of ideas, and development and

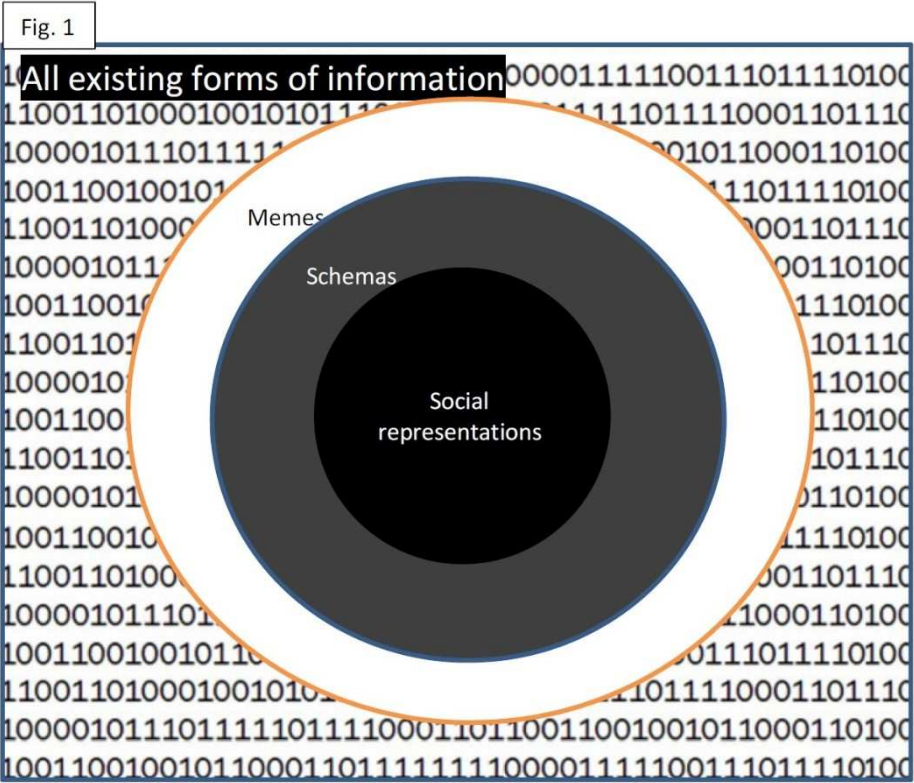
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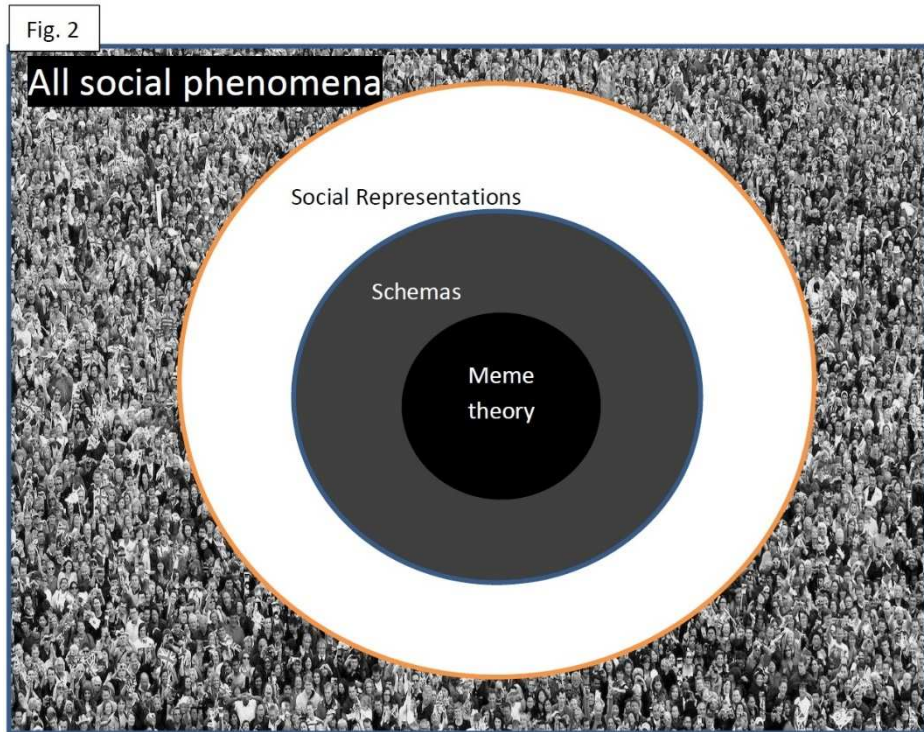
<sup>215</sup> Rob Farr, "Social Representations as Widespread Beliefs," in *The Social Psychological Study of Widespread Beliefs*, ed. Colin Fraser and George E. Gaskell, 47-64. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990): 61.

<sup>216</sup> Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, 158.

<sup>217</sup> Michael L. Best, "Models for Interacting Populations of Memes: Competition and Niche Behavior," in *The Fourth European Conference on Artificial Life*, ed. Phil Husbands and Inman Harvey, 154-163 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997); Michael L. Best and Richard Pocklington, "Meaning as Use: Transmission Fidelity and Evolution in NetNews," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 196, no. 3 (1999); Pocklington and Best, "Cultural Evolution."

spread of social representations in society will include three incorporated levels of analysis corresponding to meme, schema, and social representations theories: the informational, the psychological or cognitive, and the social.





In fact, Dan Sperber’s epidemiology of representations provides an ideal starting point for an incorporation of evolutionary meme theory into social representations research.<sup>218</sup> Sperber starts from the basic proposition that the same human mental capabilities that evolved to support culture must also in some way influence its content and organization.<sup>219</sup> In addition, currently-existing representations will influence the spread of other representations, and the kinds of information technology available in a culture will also affect the spread of representations. For instance, in a nonliterate society without

<sup>218</sup> Like Dawkins’ introduction of the meme, Sperber’s epidemiology of representations had its own precursors (e.g., Goffman and Newill, 1964).

<sup>219</sup> Dan Sperber, “Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epidemiology of Representations,” *Man* (1985); Dan Sperber, “The Epidemiology of Beliefs,” in *The Social Psychological Study of Widespread Beliefs*, ed. Colin Fraser and George E. Gaskell, 25-44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Sperber allows for genetically-programmed mental modules (similar to those proposed in some evolutionary psychology) operating as an independent influence on the spread of representations. This has been challenged by an alternative hypothesis that an evolutionary process of neuronal development accounts for what the mental modules intend to explain (Whitehouse, 1996). Support for Sperber’s view of the epidemiological spread of ideas being influenced by innate mental modules has been found in a study of the spread of numerical concepts (De Cruz, 2006).



writing technologies, representations that successfully spread will be limited to those that are easily memorized. They must also be in general accord with already-prevalent representations: a representation that sharply conflicts with a prevalent representation is less likely to spread. And, of course, representations that fit well with evolved predispositions in the human mind are favored: representations of dangers in the environment and how to avoid them, or representations that help strengthen social bonds and facilitate cooperation, are likely to spread preferentially.

Second, he posits that the study of the spread of representations will of necessity have to focus on their transformation rather than their replication or reproduction in the sense of precise copying. This owes to the fact that shared information is generally *reconstructed* in the recipient's mind rather than merely reproduced. Hence an epidemiology of representations will more often have to explain why some representations become so widespread and stable as to become properly cultural, unlike epidemiology of disease which only occasionally has to explain why some diseases transform during transmission. In the case of political and scientific ideas, the stability and fidelity with which they are transmitted is likely due to the assistance of information technologies that promote stable replication. Third, just as epidemiology is not an independent science covering an autonomous level of reality, neither is an epidemiology of representations: epidemiology studies the distributions of diseases, which are studied in turn by pathology. So too must an epidemiology of representations have a similar relationship with the psychology of thought, for instance schema theory (including an evolutionary psychology of innate schemas). They ought to have a relationship of mutual relevance and partial interpenetration. "[P]sychology is necessary but not sufficient for the characterisation and

the explanation of cultural phenomena. Cultural phenomena are ecological patterns of psychological phenomena.”<sup>220</sup>

Like Runciman’s theory of cultural and social selection, Sperber’s epidemiology of representations acknowledges that in modern societies, institutions are powerful influencers of the spread of memes and social representations. This is particularly the case in the spread of political ideas. In fact, of all ecological factors<sup>221</sup> (like already-widespread memes and social representations) in existence, institutions play the most important role in explaining the distribution of political beliefs. Institutions do not only affect the spread of representations, but they are themselves constituted by representations: *“an institution is the distribution of a set of representations which is governed by representations belonging to the set itself.”*<sup>222</sup>

To illustrate this point, Sperber provides the example of the political belief that all men are born equal.<sup>223</sup> This is a reflective belief (or meme), one that unlike an intuitive belief or a myth, was consciously originated by a few philosophers and deliberately spread through communication. It was likely understood in different ways to different people, which helped it spread in varying cultural ecologies. The most important factor in the spread of this belief was its visceral relevance in societies organized on the basis of different birthrights; particularly to those of “low birth” or no title, who would stand to benefit materially from spreading this belief to the point of saturation in society. There

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<sup>220</sup> Sperber, “Anthropology and Psychology,” 76.

<sup>221</sup> Lewandowsky et al. provide a fascinating analysis of some ecological factors in U.S. social representations, finding that climate change denial is strongly associated with a belief in *laissez faire* economics, and also associated with a belief that NASA’s moon landings were a hoax (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

<sup>222</sup> Sperber, “Anthropology and Psychology,” 87.

<sup>223</sup> Sperber, “The Epidemiology,” 41.

was, however, a serious risk in spreading this belief. And this risk originated in the institution of the aristocracy and monarchy, themselves composed of representations justifying their social role and giving them power – including the power to execute would-be revolutionaries, traitors, and regicides inspired by the belief that all men are equal and that society should be restructured to reflect such. The holders of the contrary, older belief in rank by birth eventually lost out, however, and their institutions fell apart along with the representations that supported them. (This, of course, also involved an immense amount of political action by adherents of both beliefs.)

Pléh illustrates the same point in the context of recent Chinese history in one pithy and evocative sentence: “The little Red Book of Chairman Mao was certainly cognitively easy to absorb, however, in the diffusion of its representations a more decisive role was played by a certain type of human ecology.”<sup>224</sup> And so too did the representations in the little Red Book spread to saturation in Chinese society, driving contrary representations to near-extinction along with the institutions they upheld. The key to the success of such representations is the ecology of information: the various human political, economic, psychological, religious, technological, geographical, and other factors that affect the spread of particular ideas.<sup>225</sup>

Where does this leave the schema? It is an individual-psychological bridge between the purely informational meme and the exclusively *social* representation. Schema research fleshes out the psychological dynamics of meme acquisition, modification, and interaction

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<sup>224</sup> Pléh, “Thoughts on,” 40.

<sup>225</sup> See, generally, Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Morris makes a powerful argument that the sources of fuel available are an influential selection pressure on the economic organization of society, which in turn provides a selection pressure on which ideas and ideologies are prevalent.

within the individual mind. It fills in important details about how human psychology affects the ecology of information in which memes spread and social representations take shape. Synthesizing the three theories of information – and adding political, sociological, economic, and historical factors where needed – allows us to roughly map out a society’s ecology of information: the variety of competing and complementary forces making some memes more likely than others to spread into human minds, determining what social representations can form. The ecology of information, like natural ecologies, is unlikely to be dominated by any one force or influence.<sup>226</sup> Still less can scientific “laws” purporting to explain such forces apply – ecologies are complex systems which are effectively impossible to predict with accuracy. (Imagine a prairie ecosystem recently experiencing an influx of voles – it might seem predictable that the snake population would increase, but not if the hawk population increases and reduces the numbers of both voles and snakes.) Roy Bhaskar’s application of scientific realism to the social sciences is relevant here: in complex, open systems like information ecologies, statements of *laws* are unlikely to obtain, and are more accurately conceived as statements of *tendencies*, which “may be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealized, and realized unperceived (or undetected) by men; they may also be transformed.”<sup>227</sup>

For instance, research has found that news stories that are positive rather than negative, high-arousal rather than deactivating, and surprising, useful, or interesting are

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<sup>226</sup> Similar is Alex Pentland’s concept of “social physics,” which “seeks to understand how the flow of ideas and information translates into changes in behavior ... [j]ust as the goal of traditional physics is to understand how the flow of energy translates into changes in motion” (Pentland, 2014, 5). I prefer “information ecology” to foreground the probabilistic nature of this complex system, but social physics looks to be an important contributor to the same explanatory goal.

<sup>227</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, 2008): 18.

more likely to spread widely (go viral) on social media.<sup>228</sup> This is human psychology helping to shape the ecology of information. Of course, there are many other factors in play as well. Take the regularity with which economic elites across the world and through time have preferentially adopted economic ideologies supportive of their privileged position. (The Frederick Engels of the world are the exceptions proving the rule.) A specific ecology of information is at play here: among other factors, self-interest makes policies directly beneficial to one's class more attractive, especially when such policies are congenial to one's ideology (itself built up over a lifetime of ideational and experiential influences), and additionally, homophilous social networks not only reinforce similar ideas but serve as a reference group from which to make judgments about economic policy for society as a whole.<sup>229</sup> When one's neighbors and friends are doing well, it can seem like *everyone* is. From a three-level meme, schema, and social representation view, Sperber's illustration would look something like this. As a result of the interactions of various ideas and representations in the heads of some philosophers, the meme of human equality evolved. It spread through conversations and writing, facilitated by the fact that it was viewed as beneficial to a majority of people in highly stratified societies ordered by birthright. It mutated and transformed as it spread, depending on the schemas in the minds of those it spread to. Here it became a belief in the equality of all light-skinned European males – especially in minds with highly-developed racial status schemas – there it became the belief in equality of all human beings – especially in minds without such schemas, and with experience-based schemas of being powerless in society, attached to sharp negative

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<sup>228</sup> Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>229</sup> Rael J. Dawtry et al., "Why Wealthier People Think People Are Wealthier, and Why It Matters From Social Sampling to Attitudes to Redistribution," *Psychological Science* 26, no. 9 (2015).

emotional affect. As it spread, and accumulated a body of related ideas, arguments, and elaborations, it became sufficiently shared to be considered a social representation. Now it was in competition with other social representations extolling (and shaping behavior to create) the contemporary social structure. At this point, the social representation preferring a society of equality had dispersed disproportionately to different segments of society – probably mostly among the bourgeoisie and some of the peasantry. Here, the competition between it and the social representations upholding the old society became a power struggle between the respective social groups adopting them. The battle of social representations became not only a struggle between bits of information for replication, but a literal battle between social groups motivated by sharply conflicting representations. With the victory of the bourgeoisie, new institutions were formed on the basis of their victorious ideas, and their social representations spread to absolute dominance within society as future generations were raised to adopt only them.

Wagner and Hayes' discussion of the intransitivity of explanations is relevant here.<sup>230</sup> For example, while it is true that everything in the universe operates according to the laws of physics, it would make no sense to *explain* something like one's choice of a friend by physical laws. The matter comprising all human bodies and minds may be subject to the laws of physics, but at each progressively higher or more complex level of organization, from chemistry, to biology, to psychology, to sociology, the explanations of the previous level lose relevance. Each level is to some degree the realm of an emergent phenomenon operating according to its own forces, regularities, and tendencies. Hence it is

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<sup>230</sup> Wagner and Hayes, *Everyday Discourse*, 297-299; see also Michael Polyani, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 35-36.

theoretically possible to “explain” one’s choice of a friend by reference to physical laws; but it would take an unimaginable amount of data storage to record a full description of each of the atoms (and their interactions over time) comprising oneself, one’s friend, and the shared environment – and that, over the span of a lifetime. Even then, the full “explanation” would be in a form no human could comprehend, let alone recognize or feel satisfied with. Here too, there is a certain amount of intransitivity of explanations between the levels of memes, schemas, social representations, and political economy (and history, which in a way combines them all within a record of individual and group action). An explanation of the end of feudalism based entirely on the battle between social representations is as unsatisfying as an explanation of the social representation of an equal society spreading throughout a proto-capitalist, feudal society based entirely on memes replicating themselves in willing minds. But – and just as importantly – a description of social representations is unsatisfying without an explanation of how ideas emerge, develop, and change in the first instance. So too would a description of the properties of copper wire disappoint if its weight, density, and electrical conductivity were chalked up to its “copperness.” Such is the state of all explanations of social phenomena if their informational building blocks lack an explanatory theory: a creation story, whether evolutionary, or of an equally well-supported alternate sort.

Similarly, the fact that theories of social and cultural evolution cannot explain everything of interest in society, or make accurate predictions of future developments, does not make them useless. The evolutionary economists Geoffrey Hodgson and Thorbjørn Knudsen point out:

Proposals for a generalized Darwinism are also unaffected by the claim that Darwinism or the principles of selection, inheritance, and variation are inadequate to explain social evolution. They are definitely inadequate. They are also insufficient to explain detailed outcomes in the biological sphere. In both cases, auxiliary principles are required. However, none of this undermines the validity of generalization at an abstract level. Insufficiency does not amount to invalidity. Furthermore, given the existence of complex population systems in both nature and society, a generalized Darwinism is the only overarching framework that we have for placing detailed specific mechanisms.<sup>231</sup>

#### **xi. Illustrating the spread of ideas**

*"Our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite."*

- Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*

*"Let each of us boldly and honestly say: How little it is that I really know!"*

- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "Miscellany"

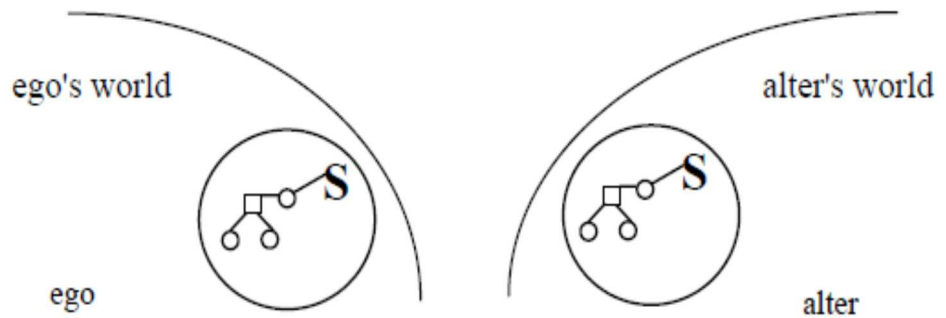
Saadi Lahlou provides a clear way to describe the overall process of how memes form into social representations, and representations spread through society.<sup>232</sup> (His diagrams are taken out of their original context here for the sake of illustration.) In the first diagram, there are two people, Ego and Alter, who share an identical representation, comprising identical memes stored in identical schematic structures:

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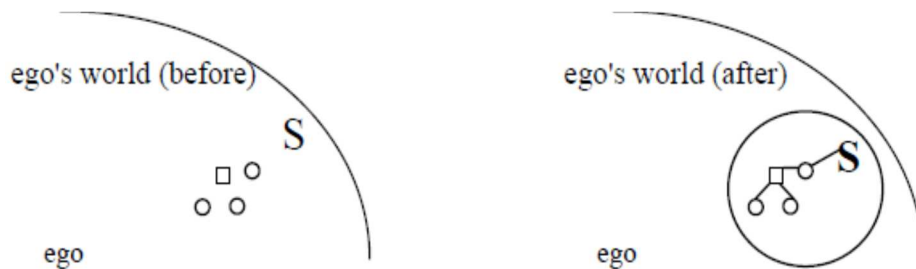
<sup>231</sup> Hodgson and Knudsen, *Darwin's Conjecture*, 45.

<sup>232</sup> Saadi Lahlou, "The Propagation of Social Representations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 26, no. 2 (1996).



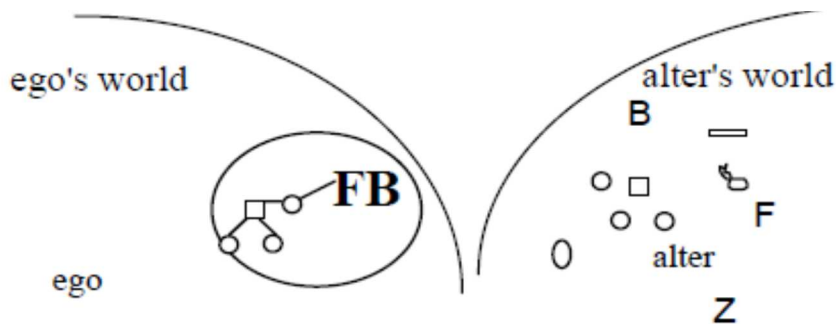


The process by which Ego (and, possibly Alter too), formed this representation was through linkages between memes. For example, Ego may have this representation of psychoanalysis, comprising three circles representing knowledge of three case studies of patients who had bad experiences with psychoanalysis, a square representing a belief that Freud was a quack, and an **S** representing the belief that psychoanalysis is a potentially dangerous pseudoscience. All together, these ideas comprise Ego's representation of psychoanalysis.

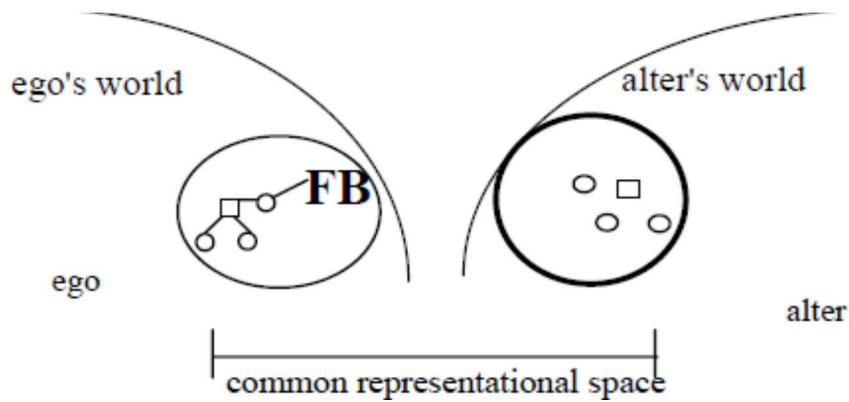


However, what if Alter does not share an identical representation with Ego? Let us imagine a different case, where Ego's representation comprises three circles representing knowledge of three case studies of patients who had fairly good experiences with psychoanalysis, a square representing the belief that Freud was a respected thinker, an **F** representing a belief that psychoanalysis has been heavily criticized recently, and a **B** representing a belief that uncertain scientific theories should be put to a test of proof. This

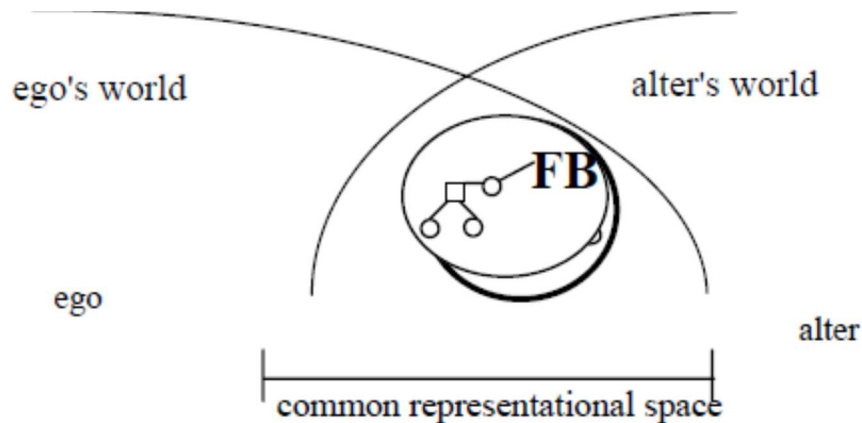
is now Ego's representation of psychoanalysis. Alter, on the other hand, has much the same information as Ego (though the case studies Alter knows concern different people who also had fairly good experiences with psychoanalysis, and Alter's beliefs **B** and **F** are less strongly held). Alter also has other memes that Ego does not, which may be tangentially related: like **Z**, which represents a belief that important health decisions should be left to experts. But while Alter shares much the same memes with Ego, they are not schematically structured like Ego's – in fact, they are not structured at all. Alter does not think about psychoanalysis enough to structure this information into a representation of psychoanalysis. If asked for an opinion on psychoanalysis, Alter would be equally likely to mention any one of these memes, and elaborate an opinion on the fly.



Now, consider that Ego is having a conversation with Alter, and the topic of psychoanalysis comes up. Ego discovers that Alter does not have a coherent opinion or representation of psychoanalysis, but that Alter knows similar basic facts that make up Ego's representation.

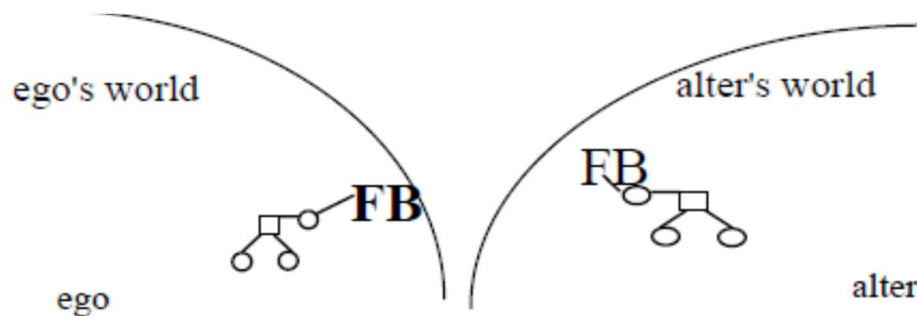


During the course of the conversation, Ego tries to persuade Alter to adopt his representation of psychoanalysis as a science founded by a respected thinker, with many good and some bad results, which has received heavy criticism, and which should be put to



a scientific test to prove its worth. Persuading Alter to adopt Ego's representation will require Alter to create a sort of narrative structure comprising the same facts or memes in the same arrangement as Ego's.

Ego proves to be a persuasive speaker, and Ego's representation has spread to Alter, while being transformed slightly in the process. Alter now shares Ego's representation of psychoanalysis. It is not a perfect copy; Alter does not feel as strongly that psychoanalysis pressing *needs* to be put to a scientific test to prove its worth, for instance. Also, the three case studies of positive experiences with psychoanalysis are slightly enlarged for Alter, because now Alter knows of Ego's similar collection of case studies.



Note that the process of spreading this representation from Ego to Alter was facilitated by the fact that from the beginning, Alter shared much the same knowledge, or memes, as Ego. (The case studies Alter remembered were of different patients, but they were vague enough to be largely similar to Ego's.) Hence, the spread of Ego's representation to Alter involved only the structuring of unorganized memes. Had Alter not had any memes relating to psychoanalysis whatsoever, Ego would first have had to teach them to Alter, possibly running into resistance. Alter may be insecure about a perceived lack of knowledge, and hostile to anyone who seems to know more. Also, it would be even more difficult for Ego's representation to spread to Alter if Alter already had a representation of psychoanalysis composed of the same memes but organized differently: for instance, if the three positive case studies were relegated to a subordinate position due to a stronger weight granted the heavy criticism psychoanalysis has received. It would be

more difficult still for Ego's representation to spread to Alter if Alter had entirely different memes comprising a radically different representation. For instance, if Alter had knowledge of dozens of studies describing a history of failure for psychoanalysis, and no knowledge of any positive experiences anyone may have had in psychoanalysis.

The constellation metaphor used in the schema discussion above is helpful here. Imagine one's political ideology as a constellation. The stars represent memes, facts of some political relevance; the imagined lines between the stars that make up the constellation represent the woven narrative that pieces together various facts into a political perspective or ideology. On a very clear night in the desert, there is a maximum of visible stars – and every constellation is traceable in the sky. However, no one's brain contains every single political meme in the world, or *every* fact of *any* relevance to politics. In the metaphorical night sky each one of us sees, clouds or light pollution prevent all stars from being seen – we all see a different assortment corresponding to our individual knowledge base. Hence, it is practically impossible for any one person to truly know every political perspective or ideology as well as its most well-informed adherent; many of the facts that comprise their narratives are invisible to us.<sup>233</sup> (This has significant downstream consequences; for instance, lacking knowledge of the history of racism in the US has been

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<sup>233</sup> This ignorance sometimes leads to the demonization of those whose ideology we are simply innocent of:

If we allowed that those who disagree with us just see the facts differently, we would have to conclude that either they, *or we*, must be mistaken about the facts. That would undermine the obviousness of the reality that we find solidly anchored in "self-evident truths." We sidestep the disconcerting possibility that we may be mistaken about these truths by attributing not a mistaken understanding of the facts, but *bad motives*, to our political opponents. It is far easier to reassure oneself about the purity of one's own motives than about the infallibility of one's own perceptions, so people persistently tend to see a world that is in fact so complicated that its interpretation generates honest disagreement as, instead, so simple that only evil people could disagree with them—malevolent people who deliberately ignore the obvious truth. Thus, *ignorance of the real possibility one's own ignorance* both enables and is reinforced by ignorance of the possibility of one's political antagonists' ignorance—such that malevolent intentions, not different perceptions, must be responsible for their antagonism. (Friedman, 2005, xviii-xix)

shown to make it harder to understand how structural racism operates today,<sup>234</sup> and differing levels of economic knowledge has been shown to affect one's choice of political candidates.)<sup>235</sup> It is easy enough to search one's own views to find the bits of knowledge that support them; it is far more difficult to search contrary views to find the bits of knowledge supporting them – since most likely, the searcher will be ignorant of, hence blind to them. Yet, learning new knowledge (like clouds dispersing, revealing formerly-hidden stars) can result in opinion change (drawing new constellations using the newly-revealed stars).<sup>236</sup> This is likely to happen only when, as Jeffrey Friedman argues, “a new consideration is so substantively different from old ones that it provides a plausible new interpretation of a great many deal of them – outweighing all of them combined, let alone any one of them – because it casts them all in a new and persuasive light that, in turn, makes incoming information that might falsify this interpretation suddenly seem implausible.”<sup>237</sup> This is analogous to a cloud covering the stars of Ursa Major except for those comprising the Big Dipper; if those clouds recede, and the rest of the constellation becomes visible, the bear's outline becomes clear and the pot-and-handle interpretation loses coherence.

Arguments between adherents of different political persuasions are like two people trying to see the same constellation in two skies with a vastly different assortment of stars. The constellations one person sees comprise stars that are simply invisible to the other.

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<sup>234</sup> Jessica C. Nelson et al., "The Marley Hypothesis: Denial of Racism Reflects Ignorance of History," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>235</sup> Peter Beattie, "Information, the Economy, and the Primaries: An Overlooked Contributor to Candidate Preference," Preprint, submitted May 20, 2016. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2772211](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2772211)

<sup>236</sup> David Kowalewski, "Teaching War: Does it Pacify Students?" *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 21, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>237</sup> Jeffrey Friedman, "Beyond Cues and Political Elites: The Forgotten Zaller," *Critical Review* 24, no. 4 (2012): 447.

The figures that well-known constellations are supposed to form are already somewhat difficult to imagine, even in the one, identical night sky we all see. So too, even with a broadly shared set of memes, it can be difficult to agree on the political narrative to weave with them.<sup>238</sup> This is all the more difficult here, where the metaphor is strained too far: seeing the exact same stars is not equivalent to having the exact same schemas. At a neuronal level, one person's schema may be significantly different than another's, even if the meme – as disembodied, abstract information – is the same. If my schema for inequality does not comprise any neuronal memory of a negative experience had as a result of inequality, and your schema for inequality is neuronally coded with viscerally painful memories of being dominated and powerless, then... we do not really have the same schemas at all. Embodied information, in the form of individual schemas, can differ even when the abstract information is the same.<sup>239</sup>

The way that we perceive our own knowledge may be largely similar to the way we perceive our field of vision. An explanation in the psychology of perception posits that our experience of perceiving a rich visual world whenever we look out into our environment is

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<sup>238</sup> This is illustrated by a survey of Republicans and Democrats on global warming: the more information Democrats had on global warming the more concerned they were – there was no such relationship among Republicans, however. They had many of the same memes about climate change, but they were incorporated into different schematic structures (like a narrative explaining worrisome findings as disputed by other reputable scientists, such that they cannot be fully trusted) that made them seem a less pressing concern (Malka et al., 2009).

<sup>239</sup> Moscovici made a similar point when he hypothesized that each social group's "world of opinion" is composed of "three dimensions: attitude, information and a field of representation or image" (Moscovici, 2008, 23). And Echebarria-Echabe wrote:

Culture provides a general frame about what is acceptable or not. Ideologies and social representations are also sources that provide arguments and determine individual positions in terms of group loyalties. ... However, personal experiences serve also to re-shape and re-elaborate these group influences. Thus, attitudes are strongly linked to personal experiences. These explain individual variation within the same group. This association with personal experience makes attitudes extremely dynamic. They become influenced not only by group but also by personal experiences. Attitudes represent the most unstable and dynamic representational level. (Echebarria-Echabe, 2012, 198)

entirely illusory (if an adaptive illusion).<sup>240</sup> According to the theory, our eyes do not scan a field of vision, sending details to be recorded by the brain as it builds a complete, movie-like representation of the outside world - a representation modified in real-time as the eye reports movements and new additions or subtractions. Rather than sight being a passive process whereby a complete representation of the outside world is projected in our mind as the information from light streams through our eyes, we never actually form complete representations of the outside world at any given time. Instead, we are constantly building fleeting representations one at a time, 'to order,' of individual objects or features in our field of vision. Once our fovea, the part of the retina with the highest relative acuity, shifts focus to another object or feature, the previous representation dissolves into a haze of undifferentiated features. Our vision *seems* as if it is continuously capturing all or most of the richness of a scene, but this is only because our fovea, during the course of the many saccades our eyes make each second, can quickly attend to enough individual details to create the illusion of a consistent and complete stream of vision. Although it seems that we perceive all objects in our line of sight concurrently, this is an illusion. In reality, our minds do not form a complete representation of our visual field. The outside world itself is the only representative model we have, and it is accessed only if and when it is needed by quick saccadic eye movements.

In a similar illusion operating in the way we perceive our knowledge, we feel as though we have a largely complete set of knowledge about the world. This is what has been called "naïve realism," the widespread belief that one "sees things as they are," without distortion or ignorance, an epistemological error which prevents the naïve realist from

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<sup>240</sup> Susan Blackmore, *Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 78-92.



recognizing “that her own interpretation *is* an interpretation, as opposed to being the secular equivalent of a revelation.”<sup>241</sup> Naïve realism is our default state; we are blind to the fact that “what seems to be a self-disclosing reality is actually a generalization from a partial vision of reality, the product of fallible, contestable interpretations of culturally mediated perceptions.”<sup>242</sup> (True realism would instead recognize that the realm of unknown unknowns dwarfs that of known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown knowns.)<sup>243</sup> We may know of gaps, but they do not bother us much or dissuade us from considering our knowledge to be nearly, fairly, or at least *functionally* complete.<sup>244</sup> The gaps in our knowledge we are aware of are usually considered to be in unimportant, trivial areas. (Like when driving, we feel like the sky is part of our rich, movie-screen field of vision – we just choose not to focus on it.) Even ideas, political views, and ideologies we disagree with, we feel that we understand. In fact, we may feel that we understand them better than their (benighted) adherents do themselves – our superior understanding is, after all, what keeps us from being adherents ourselves.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Jeffrey Friedman, *No Exit: The Problem with Technocracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming): 36.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>243</sup> According to Donald Rumsfeld, “unknown knowns” are “things that you think you know that it turns out you did not” – like Saddam Hussein’s WMD, or the gratitude with which Iraqis would receive US liberators/invaders, or the low human and resource cost of the war, etc. (as quoted in Errol Morris’ documentary *Unknown Knowns*). It could more suitably be used to refer to Polyani’s concept of “tacit knowledge” (Polyani, 2009).

<sup>244</sup> David Dunning, “The Dunning–Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One’s Own Ignorance,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 44, edited by James M. Olson and Mark P. Zanna, 247-296 (San Diego: Elsevier, 2011): 248-251.

<sup>245</sup> As the cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach put it:

[W]e’re often unaware that we are inside a house of mirrors, and this insularity makes us even more ignorant. We fail to appreciate the other side’s perspective. And on the rare occasion that we do hear what our opponent has to say, they seem ignorant because they fail to understand our perspective. They characterize us simplistically, without any appreciation for the nuance and depth of our position. The feeling that overwhelms us is “if only they understood.” If only they understood how much we care, how open we are, and how our ideas could help, they would see things our way. But here’s the rub: While it’s true that your opponents don’t understand the problem in all its subtlety and complexity, neither do you. (Sloman and Fernbach, 2017, 174)

However, from the theoretical perspective outlined here, this perception is certainly an illusion. The memes we have, and the social representations we share, are never more than a miniscule fraction of the total in existence. Yet with the sort of unabashed pluck and overconfidence typical of human psychology (discussed later), we tend to believe that the narratives we form to explain the world – from the world of our personal relationships to the world of politics – are the best possible explanations for the facts. *The facts* – not *our* facts, that restricted set of facts we know, or the memes that happened to reproduce in our brains.

## **xii. Studying the spread of political ideas**

An integrative, evolutionary social representations theory for political psychology would focus on those representations that are the currency not only of political debate, but political agreement as well: the “welfare state” as well as “free markets,” “humanitarian intervention” as well as “human rights,” “state-led development” as well as “democracy,” “global warming” as well as “environmental protection,” the “preferential option for the poor” as well as “capitalism.” These representations are, like less political representations (psychoanalysis, for instance), an important area for social psychology to elucidate. They are political, not only because their content is that of political policies, but because in a very real sense, they compose what *is* the political realm. Everything in the political realm in modern societies can be traced to a core of information; information, in a very strong metaphorical sense, is the DNA of politics. Hence a political psychology capable of answering the most vital questions in its area of study will focus on the representations that give substance to, shape, and make the political realm what it is.

These are the ideas that the German philosopher Max Stirner appropriately termed “spooks” – abstract ideas about incomprehensibly large numbers of people and the incomprehensibly complex relations between them. Kathleen Taylor calls them “ethereal ideas,” which

are so ambiguous that they are often interpreted very differently by different individuals (political theorists describe political ethereal ideas, such as liberty and equality, as ‘essentially contested’). This ambiguity makes them hard to challenge with rational debate; participants in such a debate may, in effect, be talking at cross-purposes. Speakers often use such ‘glittering generalities’ to mask impracticalities, hidden catches or other devils in the detail of their aims and objectives, or in the hope of evoking an emotional response from their audience which will increase the level of commitment to their agenda.<sup>246</sup>

The conflict between spooks and the realities they purport to describe is illustrated in the following example: “He who is infatuated with *man* leaves persons out of account so far as that infatuation extends, and floats in an ideal, sacred interest. *Man*, you see, is not a person, but an ideal, a spook.”<sup>247</sup> Today, the brains we have evolved are capable of entertaining memes of all sorts, including spooks like “man” “democracy,” “free markets” and the rest.<sup>248</sup> But when our brains were still evolving this capability, we lived in small

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<sup>246</sup> Kathleen Taylor, *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 27.

<sup>247</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 72.

<sup>248</sup> Stirner elaborated on the political consequences of very consequential and strongly-held spooks: What is it, then, that is called a ‘fixed idea’? An idea that has subjected the man to itself. When you recognize, with regard to such a fixed idea, that it is a folly, you shut its slave up in an asylum. ... Is not all the stupid chatter of most of our newspapers the babble of fools who suffer from the fixed idea of morality, legality, Christianity, and so forth, and only seem to go about free because the madhouse in which they walk takes in so broad a space? Touch the fixed idea of such a fool, and you will at once have to guard your back against the lunatic’s stealthy malice. For these great lunatics are like the little so-called lunatics in this point too, that they assail by

forager bands tied together in a cooperative structure by mechanisms of “aggressive egalitarianism.”<sup>249</sup> In these ancestral bands, spooks would be in short supply: any idea that could evolve about “society” would be limited to describing a total number of people small enough to sit around a bonfire. (Perhaps the first spooks that evolved described out-group bands, whose members were not well known.) There would have been no ethnicities, “races,” nations, or political philosophies – the only prominent spooks would have been religious. But once sedentary, agricultural societies emerged, a breeding ground for spooks appeared. Ideas could be formed that purported to describe society and its relations, but the referent of such ideas could never be directly witnessed in its totality.<sup>250</sup> We can never be certain that such spooks accurately describe a reality that we can verify with our senses; at best, we can only ascertain whether these spooks are in accord with the evidence of empirical investigations into social phenomena. And evidence, no matter how persuasive and how large a body of it we have at hand, is by its nature incapable of perfect correspondence with the underlying reality it describes. Plus, we *never* obtain the full body of evidence, only the evidence available to us; the vast majority of possible evidence has

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stealth him who touches their fixed idea. They first steal his weapon, steal free speech from him, and then they fall upon him with their nails. (Stirner, 1995, 43)

<sup>249</sup> Christopher Boehm’s analysis evokes Sperber’s “cultural attractor” concept in several respects. First, there was a cultural attractor coterminous with natural selection that produced aggressive egalitarianism, the precondition for group cooperation to emerge as an evolutionarily stable strategy. The sort of self-aggrandizement common among our chimpanzee relatives was strongly disfavored, ridiculed, and fought against – and cultural practices supporting egalitarianism flourished. With the formation of sedentary, agricultural societies, a new cultural attractor appeared favoring representations that would support highly unequal, stratified societies capable of generating large social surpluses (or primitive capital accumulation) in an environment of low technological development. Since then, the evolution from chiefdoms and monarchies to republics and social democracies suggests the presence of a cultural attractor with its origins in our “aggressive egalitarian” evolutionary past. (Boehm, 2012)

<sup>250</sup> People differ in their ability to entertain spooks; that is, their capacity to imagine groups and their relations in modern mass societies. For good or ill, those with a better imaginative capacity may be more likely to be politically active (Petersen, 2013, 291).

been ruled inadmissible, in the sense that only a fraction of the total of relevant memes ever makes an appearance in the court of our minds.

Therefore, an integrative social representations approach to political psychology would look not only at social representations, but their constituent memes. As Lahlou's illustration makes clear, social representations can spread only on the basis of reorganizing memes into roughly the same structure as the original representation. Without the bits of information that comprise a social representation, there is nothing to be spread. A blueprint is not enough to construct a building – bricks and mortar are required as well. And in tracing the spread of ideas that form representations, a primary focus must be on the media, which has always been at the core of social representations theory.<sup>251</sup> Social network analysis could also be used to uncover how ideas spread outside of being directly transmitted through the media.<sup>252</sup>

This suggests the use of Moscovici's "tracer" method: investigating the spread of individual bits of information that either already form part of an existing social representation, or carry the potential of forming one. For instance, by 2003 a social representation of the "need" for a preemptive war on Iraq was widely distributed among the U.S. population. For this to have been possible, several memes had to be widely distributed first: a link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11, fabricated evidence of an advanced nuclear weapons program, selective facts of Hussein's past brutality, etc. These memes can act as potential tracers to track the development and spread of what was

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<sup>251</sup> Michel-Louis Rouquette, "Social Representations and Mass Communication Research," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 26, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>252</sup> Stephen P. Borgatti et al., "Network Analysis in the Social Sciences," *Science* 323, no. 5916 (2009). Despite the fact that the majority of politically-relevant information we have originated in the media, social network effects on idea flow are massive: "roughly the same size as the influence of genes on behavior or IQ on academic performance" (Pentland, 2014, 53-54).

eventually to become a widely-distributed social representation. So too can memes that are not yet structured into a widespread social representation be tracked to forecast the emergence of new social representations: for instance, the 99%/1% dichotomy meme is a potential tracer of a social representation of a new economic order that may become widely distributed. Most importantly for democracies, measuring the spread of memetic tracers can reveal which representations have become properly social, are real contenders in the marketplace of ideas, and thereby can potentially shape political policy. It can also reveal which representations are restricted to an inconsequential minority, and hence are effectively excluded from the public sphere. For instance, if the meme that every currently developed country used protectionist policies in the past, or the meme that global GDP growth in the protectionist 1950s-1970s was higher than in the neoliberal 1980s-2000s, are barely to be found among a population, then not only does there not exist a *social* representation favoring significant governmental intervention in the economy – and how could it, without knowledge of its past successes – but one is unlikely to form in the short term, at least until its constituent memes spread more widely. This effectively means that the citizenry is incapable of democratic control over the issue of *dirigisme* vs. *laissez faire*: without mere knowledge of one possible option and reasons for it, no choice in any meaningful sense of the word can be exercised over it.

There are potential methodological pitfalls with such a “tracer” approach, among them pseudo-agreement and pseudo-disagreement.<sup>253</sup> While different people may use the same words, their meanings may differ; or people may use different words, but their

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<sup>253</sup> Ivana Marková, "Towards an Epistemology of Social Representations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 26, no. 2 (1996).

meanings may be similar. Pseudo-agreement can occur between supporters of “human rights,” one of whom considers these rights to include civil and political freedoms, the other of whom considers these rights to encompass social and economic freedoms as well. Pseudo-disagreement can occur between a supporter of “free markets” with “limited government intervention,” and a supporter of “social democracy” favoring a “wide role for government in the economy.” Yet they may both actually agree that the majority of goods are best provided through market mechanisms, regulated only by government intervention to prevent market distortions, and that public goods are best provided by public institutions controlled by democratic government.

When analyzing written ideas, this problem may be partially addressed by software techniques like latent semantic indexing.<sup>254</sup> But until software is developed that perfectly “understands” human language use (and judging by the state-of-the-art in translation software, there is still a long way to go), Marková’s insights call for multi-method approaches to get a firmer grasp of meaning in both written and spoken language. Tracing the spread of individual memes, particularly through the media, is a first step. But wherever possible, multiple methods should be used to tease apart the complexities of social communication and language use, and arrive at the reality. Or, rather, our closest possible approximation.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Best and Pocklington, “Meaning as Use”; see also Annamaria S. de Rosa, “The ‘Associative Network’: A Technique for Detecting Structure, Contents, Polarity and Stereotyping Indexes of the Semantic Fields,” *European Review of Applied Psychology* 52, no. 3/4 (2002).

<sup>255</sup> Sophus Reinert’s staggering work of scholarship, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy*, provides an excellent example of what an integrative social representations approach to political psychology might look like. In his historical analysis of the protectionist treatise *Essay on the State of England*, Reinert painstakingly tracks its translations and transformations across a Europe of varying political-economies-cum-information-ecologies. (Reinert, 2011)

### **xiii. Conclusion**

If nothing else, the contribution of meme theory (or theories of cultural evolution more broadly) to an understanding of why people believe what it is they believe is this: information is physical, and as such it must be fashioned within a human mind or transported there via some medium (speech, books, TV, etc.). Contrary to centuries of Western thought, knowledge and the minds that use it are not spiritual; information cannot float from where it originated, through the ether or the realm of the spirit, to arrive in our brains. If we are at a neighbor's house, we can learn exactly what that neighbor is doing simply by looking: photons bouncing off of our neighbor into our eyes give us reliable information. If we are in our own house across the street, some information might reach us in the form of sound waves ("loud music and conversation – must be a party") or photons (if our neighbor is near a window with the lights on). If we live a few blocks away, the means by which information can reach us are far more limited. Perhaps we can use a cell phone to call our neighbor, so that the sound waves her vocal chords produce can be converted into electrical impulses, then into radio waves, back into electronic impulses, and finally back into sound waves that transmit us information about what she is doing. The information content of this conversation is less than in the previous two examples, however: some uncertainty remains ("perhaps she is lying"). But if our neighbor has gone on vacation to an isolated cabin in the woods, we have *no* means of getting information about what she is doing save by traveling to the cabin, where our eyes and ears can pick up light and sound. Short of that, we can generate all sorts of ideas about what she *might* be doing, with greater or lesser probability – but the information content of these suppositions is miniscule. Sure, we might know that our neighbor likes to fish and so guess



that she is currently fishing, but she could be reading, hiking, cooking, or doing any number of other things.

In the realm of politics, we are rarely in situations similar to the first two examples unless we live near a capital and work in government; and even then, we will only ever get direct information from events we personally witness. (Even someone permanently living in Congress or Parliament cannot hope to directly witness all of the conversations, briefings, negotiations, drafting, backroom deals and the like that make up the practice of governance, on *one* issue let alone thousands.) Instead, we have to rely on other media (like the cell phone conversation with the neighbor living blocks away) to inform ourselves about politics, principally using what we call *the* media. Newspapers, magazines, television, and the internet can provide mountains of information about politics, but the channels through which such mediated information comes to us are so complex as to make logistics for Walmart or the US Army seem like child's play. Imagine the logistics involved in one news story about trends in income: information in the heads of millions of people must be translated into a magnetic field on a hard disk or ink on paper, sent via photons in fiber optic cables or via planes, trains, and automobiles carrying paper to a government server or office, processed by computers and tax agents into a condensed summary readable by a journalist; then the journalist must analyze the same information from millions of people for years spanning decades – and this, just to report a few numbers. To provide meaning and context, the journalist must speak to several experts, each of whom has spent years reading the condensed knowledge of hundreds of other experts in books and articles, and make judgments about what information to include based on a lifetime collecting

information about the economy (and the trustworthiness of various kinds of experts) through her own personal experiences and countless conversations with others.

And all this is for a relatively simple kind of story: income trends. Foreign policy is an order of magnitude more complex: a far greater variety of aggregated information than mere tax returns is required, from national data on GDP, life expectancy, median income, inequality, quality of life, etc., to more specific data on certain key sectors of the economy (for a potential belligerent, information on military technology, energy, infrastructure, transportation, agriculture, and even the news media would be required). All of that would be just to provide raw numbers; for more interpretive information, a journalist would need dozens of public opinion polls, and conversations with top government officials, business leaders, journalists, and academic experts, from all of the countries involved, each of whom draws upon a lifetime of collecting information directly and through media.

In the end, we cannot avoid the conclusion that we are profoundly, radically reliant on the media for whatever information we have about politics. Such information is not dropped off by a stork or delivered by Santa Klaus on their way back from the world's capitals, major cities, and war zones; it comes the only way it can, through the work of journalists collecting it from its sources and delivering it to us. "Facts have no wings."<sup>256</sup> The media is first and foremost a provider of information logistics, arranging for the transport of physical information from its many points of origin to millions of people. Our extreme reliance upon the news media means it has tremendous power to shape our beliefs, at the very least by determining what informational building blocks we have

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<sup>256</sup> Scott L. Althaus et al., "Assumed Transmission in Political Science: A Call for Bringing Description Back In." *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 04 (2011): 1065.

available to construct understandings.<sup>257</sup> While other forms of power may be more obvious (armies, police, wealth), the power of information reigns supreme – a truth which evaded Stalin when he famously asked “how many divisions does the Pope have?” As Sandra Braman observes:

Informational power shapes human behaviors by manipulating the informational bases of instrumental, structural, and symbolic power. Informational power dominates power in other forms, changes how they are exercised, and alters the nature of their effects. Informational power can be described as ‘genetic,’ because it appears at the genesis – the informational origins – of the materials, social structures, and symbols that are the stuff of power in its other forms.”<sup>258</sup>

This conclusion about the informational power of the media can be reached through conduits other than meme theory. Walter Lippmann, writing before the physical nature of information was understood, made precisely the same argument.<sup>259</sup> More recently, Jeffrey Friedman has arrived at the same conclusion through an epistemological route, noting that news consumers are “helpless to discern whether the ideas they find plausible are in fact worthless—a matter about which they are radically ignorant. Thus, members of the public will be captive to the worldviews created by the journalism, and the other cultural inputs, that they happen to have encountered.”<sup>260</sup> Further:

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<sup>257</sup> Jan Senko’s documentary about the media influences on her father that turned him from a “nonpolitical Kennedy Democrat” into a far-right conservative (and finally a strong liberal) provides a perfect illustration. The man’s political beliefs were profoundly influenced – to the point of determined – by the media environment he was exposed to: primarily TV news while a nonpolitical Kennedy Democrat, then rightwing radio transformed him into a far-right conservative, and then internet news as occasioned a transformation into a strong liberal. The narrator suggests that his exposure to rightwing media was an aberrant form of influence, but the film is better read as an illustration that our political beliefs come from the media environment we inhabit. (Senko, 2015).

<sup>258</sup> Sandra Braman, *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006): 26.

<sup>259</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Blacksburg VA: Wilder, 2010).

<sup>260</sup> Friedman, *No Exit*, 61.

However much the media convey the impression of direct access to reality, then, we know the impression is wrong, for even if there is a kernel of truth on the screen or in the photo, it is not the whole truth. Yet in trying to understand the whole truth, what choice is there but to rely on such impressions? All reports about large-scale or long-term social processes, even dry and formal scholarly studies, paint pictures of reality that are judged holistically—by conformity with one’s web of beliefs—not just technically (e.g., by tests of statistical significance). Yet the beliefs in anyone’s web are themselves bits and pieces of perceived reality, and we may inadvertently have pieced them together in a way that dramatically misrepresents the whole. So while we can assume some overlap between reality and our overall webs of belief, we cannot know where the overlap lies. All our beliefs seem worthy of belief, but we recognize, having rejected naïve realism, that some or all of them may be unworthy.<sup>261</sup>

A secondary contribution of meme theory is its hypothesis about the process responsible for the immense size and diversity of the intellectual realm, including ideas, theories, technologies, ideologies, religions, stories, cultures, and the like. By explaining what populates the realm of the intellect as the product of an evolutionary process, meme theory provides an essential perspective: looking at information from the meme’s eye view. (“When information is defined as an agent, its power is clearly recognized.”)<sup>262</sup> From this perspective, we ask why some ideas developed and spread (that is, what selection pressures account for their success) rather than others. This obliges us to practice

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>262</sup> Braman, *Change of State*, 17.

ecological thinking, to examine the ecology of information comprising all of the forces, tendencies, and pressures making some ideas more or less likely to spread and take hold among some rather than other segments of society.<sup>263</sup>

In natural ecology, there are stronger and weaker forces in operation, but no laws or strict determinants. An abnormally cold year is a force operating against the growth of trees, but other forces from rainfall to soil conditions can counteract (or exacerbate) the effect of a low average temperature. In information ecology, the same principle of complex systems applies: no laws or determinants, but a variety of forces operating in different ways and producing different effects. Among the forces affecting the ecology of political information in society are: our evolved psychology, particularly its social (political) aspects, and how our brains process incoming information; institutions, particularly those of education and culture; the political economy of media, which is to say all of the forces operating on media outlets influencing their selection and presentation of information; and, of course, the ideas and social representations currently widespread in society (and which ideas and representations are widespread among which social groups), whose dominance was produced by the aforementioned forces and historical accident.

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<sup>263</sup> Shiping Tang provides an excellent list:

At the individual level, sensation and emotion (e.g., pain and pleasure), instrumental calculation (often in the shadow of social power), habit (socialization and internalization, often backed by power), faith, affection, legality (embedded in existing social structure, often explicitly backed by power), and anti-socialization can all operate as selection forces. At the collective level (i.e., family, group, corporation, state, and the international system level), selection forces can again range from power (material and ideational combined), to instrumental reason, habit, emotion, and legality. More importantly, the two levels interact with each other: selection forces interact with each other to shape social outcomes at the two levels, outcomes at one level can come back to function as selection forces at the other level. Most prominently, outcomes of selection at higher level impact selection at lower level: ideas are produced under a particular institutional and cultural system (i.e., the social structure), and existing institutions and cultural traits inevitably influence what new ideas are pursued and what new ideas will be retained. All these lead to a profoundly complex picture. (Tang, 2013, 26, references removed)

No one force or selection pressure operates as if it were a law, strictly determining how ideas evolve and spread. Rather than Marx's conception of ideas *expressing* economic interests<sup>264</sup> – which posits that the predominant if not only selection pressure on the ideas one adopts is one's economic status – Weber's conception of “elective affinities” is what better describes how people adopt ideas, and ideas adopt people.<sup>265</sup> Just as chemical compounds exhibit varying affinities for water, being hydrophobic or hydrophilic, there exist elective affinities between people and ideas. Everything else being equal, a king is unlikely to be attracted to democracy, and a nun is unlikely to be attracted to sexual libertinism; a sweatshop worker is likely to find socialism more attractive than a sweatshop owner, and a rich person is likely to find *laissez faire* more attractive than a poor person; few North Koreans read *The Road to Serfdom*, and few Americans read *Das Kapital*; someone of limited mental ability is more likely to prefer a simple affirmation of the status quo to a complex critique of it; and, as Orwell noted “[t]he nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.”<sup>266</sup>

These examples also illustrate that there are at least two interacting ecologies of information: an individual ecology, and a social ecology. There is the ecology of information

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<sup>264</sup> “The grand error of Marxism, and of routine political-science attributions of political decisions to people's demographic characteristics—class, race, gender, place of residence—is to assume that people somehow know what is in their economic, or racial, gender, or whatever interest without the intervention of *ideas* about the nature and legitimacy of those interests, and about which public-policy measures would serve those interests. These ideas have to be “acquired” somehow— for instance, by reading Marx's books, his pamphlets, and other cultural mediators between reality and his followers' theories about it. Yet Marx, and other theorists of “interest” as the basis of political action, allow no place for theories in their own theories. The proletarians (like everyone else) are supposed to figure out what is in their interest from their direct—culturally unmediated—confrontation with (exploitative) reality. They are not supposed to have to read *Capital* before becoming revolutionaries.” (Friedman, 2003, 241)

<sup>265</sup> H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, “Introduction: The Man and His Work,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 3-76 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947): 62-63.

<sup>266</sup> George Orwell, *England Your England and Other Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953).

inside one's one mind, created by genes expressed in our developmental environment, our life experiences, and a bevy of ideational influences from school to the media; and there is the ecology of information within society, created by the aggregate of individuals' information ecologies, plus institutional, political, economic, historical, and foreign influences. The fact that few North Koreans read *The Road to Serfdom* probably has more to do with their social ecology of information (censorship, poverty), whereas the fact that few Americans read *Das Kapital* probably has more to do with their individual ecology of information (ideational influences suggesting that Marx was wrong and/or evil). The nationalist not disapproving of atrocities committed by fellow nationals is an effect of the individual ecology of information (rationalizing atrocities away as unfortunate but necessary), while not even hearing about them is an effect of the social ecology of information (the media giving less attention to such atrocities). But the two are interpenetrating, with individual ecologies of information nested inside a social ecology. Human psychology is the first selection pressure operating on the evolution of ideas. Schema research has shown that we store information in organized, networked chunks subject to snowball effects: bits of information form concepts, linked to similar concepts and memories of individual experiences and feelings, and as a conceptual schema develops it becomes easier to add more and more information to it. Contrariwise, information that does not fit or contradicts a schema is more likely to be rejected, or be assimilated in a biased fashion. Memes do not spread from brain to brain like computer files are copied from computer to computer, without prejudice and as perfect copies. They spread differentially, depending on the brain's preexisting schemas, and they are rough copies, linked to idiosyncratic memories and emotions in different brains. Hence the information

content of a meme in two minds may be the same, but the subjective understanding or meaning they engender may be different. And these subjective understandings, undergirded by memories and emotion, make some ideologies or social representations more or less likely to be adopted. Someone whose experiences at the bottom of an economic hierarchy have produced acute, painful emotional connections to concepts like exploitation would be more likely to adopt an ideology focusing on exploitation and its elimination; for those whose experiences at the top of an economic hierarchy have produced positive, pleasurable connections to concepts like achievement and success would be more likely to adopt an ideology focusing on the benefits of competition and rewarding individual effort.

Social representations theory provides a way of investigating and understanding coherent bodies of ideas (or memplexes) prevalent at the social level. Since rare ideas and isolated, individual perspectives are without much political import, the social representations paradigm offers the best fit for a study of the evolution of ideas in the political realm. Its methodological pluralism allows for the widest possible variety of quantitative and qualitative techniques, and should welcome conceptual additions from theories of cultural evolution, empirical research on schemas, and methods from epidemiology – especially if the paradigm is to be kept, as Moscovici would have wanted, “on the boil, flexible and unstable.”<sup>267</sup>

If this mix of theories, concepts, and methodologies is alien to political scientists, then so much the worse for political scientists. Continuing to treat ideas and opinions as if

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<sup>267</sup> Serge Moscovici, “Reflections on Social Demand and Applied Social Psychology in General,” in *Social Representations in the “Social Arena”*, ed. Annamaria S. de Rosa, 67-76 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 76.



they were the direct byproduct of forms of identity, or the mind as a black box, will keep political science in an unproductive rut, able only to describe political occurrences and rarely to explain them in a satisfying manner.<sup>268</sup> Adhering to a chauvinistic, intolerant positivism – in addition to being ridiculous, given that positivism is no longer tenable in contemporary philosophy of science<sup>269</sup> – can only hinder the ability of political scientists to explain why people have the political beliefs that they do. As Jeffrey Friedman argues, “[t]he ultimate criterion of science is openness to evidence. Insisting that only quantifiable, homogeneous units count as evidence is utterly unscientific and can only retard the search for an understanding of why people believe what they do.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Friedman, “Beyond Cues”; Friedman, *No Exit*.

<sup>269</sup> “Logical positivism is dead and logical empiricism is no longer an avowed school of philosophical thought.” (Curd and Cover, 1998, 1228). See also Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 19-38.

<sup>270</sup> Friedman, “Beyond Cues,” 453.

## Chapter 2

### Evolution – How We Got the Minds We Have Today

*"Any change in men's views as to what is good and right in human life make[s] its way but tardily at the best. Especially is this true of any change in the direction of what is called progress; that is to say, in the direction of divergence from the archaic position – from the position which may be accounted the point of departure at any step in the social evolution of the community. Retrogression, reapproach to a standpoint to which the race has been long habituated in the past, is easier."*

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

To demonstrate how little we know about our own brains and how they work, philosopher Andy Clark wrote an imaginary letter from the brain of a man named John, directed to John himself:

In reality, I consist only of multiple mindless streams of highly parallel and often relatively independent computational processes. I am not a mass of little agents so much as a mass of non-agents, tuned and responsive to proprietary inputs and cleverly orchestrated by evolution so as to yield successful purposive behavior in most daily settings. My single voice, then, is no more than a literary conceit.

At root, John's mistakes are all variations on a single theme. He thinks that I see the world as he does, that I parcel things up as he would, that I think the way he would report his thoughts. None of this is the case. I am not the inner echo of John's conceptualizations. Rather, I am their somewhat alien source. ...

The sad fact, then, is that almost nothing about me is the way John imagines it to be. We remain strangers despite our intimacy (or perhaps because of it). John's language, introspections, and over-simplistic physicalism incline him to identify my organization too closely with his own limited perspective. He is thus blind to my fragmentary, opportunistic and generally alien nature. He forgets that I am in large part a survival-oriented device which greatly pre-dates the emergence of linguistic abilities, and that my role in promoting conscious and linguaform cognition is just a recent sideline. This sideline is, of course, a major root of his misconceptions. Possessed as John is of such a magnificent vehicle for the compact and communicable expression of knowledge, he often mistakes the forms and conventions of that vehicle for the structure of thought itself.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that although we intuitively feel like our minds and our brains are the same thing (physicalism), this is deceptive. What it feels like to think is not the same thing as how our brains actually work. We think in terms (literally) of our language: "I am hungry" or "this cup is too hot to hold" – linguaform cognition.<sup>2</sup> But our brains do not exclusively process word-coded signals – our stomachs do not say "I am empty," and our fingers' nerve endings do not say "ouch, hot!" to our brains. A lot of the work our brains do is outside of the realm of words, even though our thought processes are dominated by words. Hence, there is a lot going on in our brains that our minds do not experience.

Although this contradicts our lived experience, it should not come as a great surprise. Our brains, after all, are quite similar in structure to the brains of other mammals,

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Clark, "I Am John's Brain," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995): 147-148.

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, our language and the words it contains subtly influences aspects of the way we think (Tohidian, 2009).

and few would imagine that rats tell stories or think in narrative form. What separates our brains from those of other mammals is that on top of all the cerebral structures we share, humans have a capacity for language. With it, we tell stories, think in narrative form – and confuse this for the totality of what is going on inside of our brains.

However, a great deal of human cognition occurs outside of our conscious awareness – and some of it may be very important. For instance, we forget someone’s name only to remember it again out of the blue minutes later. This is only the tip of the iceberg, as later chapters will demonstrate. But first, in order to understand the minds that we have, we have to look at how they originated.

### **i. Where we came from**

*“Let no one think that the world can be ruled without blood; the sword of the ruler must be red and bloody; for the world will and must be evil, and the sword is God’s rod and vengeance upon it.”*

- Martin Luther, *Works*

Our brains are the product of a staggeringly long period of evolution: 60-70 million years since the ancestral primates first appeared.<sup>3</sup> During this period, as different species appeared and branched off to develop independently, primate brains grew steadily larger. This trend toward larger brains is evident throughout mammals, and in birds to some extent as well. Larger brains, while costly in terms of metabolism, clearly bring great benefits to the animals most like ourselves. Primate species that appeared more recently,

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<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Vallender et al., "Genetic Basis of Human Brain Evolution," *Trends in Neurosciences* 31, no. 12 (2008).

like apes, have relatively larger brains than New World monkeys, for instance. Our closest relative, the chimpanzee (also a relative newcomer on the evolutionary scene), shares with us not only a sizeable brain but also many of its most salient features. Our own brains are not massively different than those of chimps – much of the evolution of our brains occurred before we branched off from our primate cousins.

One helpful feature of primates' increasingly large brains is that they allow for both individual and social learning. Across primate species, bigger brains are associated with greater use of tools, innovative behaviors, and social learning. Likewise, primate species with larger brains exhibit greater behavioral flexibility facilitated by longer periods of juvenile development (the time it takes for a baby to become an adult).<sup>4</sup> Cognitive evolution proceeds from the inflexible specializations small brains are capable of (“if you see a larger animal, run!”), to what only larger brains can perform: self-regulated, intentional actions drawing on mental representations, inferences, and self-monitoring (“if you see a larger animal, decide whether you know anything about it; then choose what to do depending on the danger it poses, its value as food, and your own ability to kill it”).<sup>5</sup> Bigger brains take over some of the functions that genes themselves usually perform: the flexible behavior large brains allow helps animals adapt immediately to variable conditions, instead of having to wait thousands or millions of years for genetic evolution to provide a hard-wired adaptation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 135-136.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Plotkin, *Darwin Machines*, 144-152, 243-244.

Three million years ago, our big-brained ancestors had developed an upright stance – no knuckle-draggers, they! – and were living in African forests. Two and a half million years ago, a change in climate brought drought to our home in East Africa, drying up rivers and forests and expanding grasslands. While the forest was certainly not the safest place to live, our ancestors were even more imperiled in the grassland, where lions and other predators could spot us from afar and outrun us for a kill. At this point in our evolutionary history, there was a strong selection pressure for adaptations that would help us survive in the novel environment of the African savanna. Cooperation and group living became a possible solution, as only fairly large groups could offer reliable protection in this new environment.<sup>7</sup>

The climatic changes that forced our ancestors from the forest to the savanna were only to become more severe and variable.<sup>8</sup> The average global temperature was dropping, while fluctuations in temperature, rainfall, and levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide became more drastic. During the past two and a half million years, all life on Earth was buffeted by rapid and chaotic changes in climate. These changes were too fast for genetic evolution to produce appropriate adaptations – instead, behavioral flexibility seems to have been the best adaptation genes could provide in such an unstable environment. And as behavioral flexibility requires big brains, during the last 2.5 million years, brain size for mammals increased more than it had during the previous 20 million years. The primate lineage leading to humans witnessed the fastest rate of growth in brain size.

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<sup>7</sup> Stefan Klein, *Survival of the Nicest: How Altruism Made Us Human and Why it Pays to Get Along* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2014): 110-111.

<sup>8</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 133-134.

At the same time, our ancestors were evolving a much smaller difference between the sizes of male and female bodies. Termed “sexual dimorphism,” this is a phenomenon that gives us clues about the social organization of a species: with high sexual dimorphism, males are much larger than females, and more likely to be engaged in violent competition over mates and resources. A smaller rate of sexual dimorphism indicates a less hierarchical social structure, more monogamous pair bonding, and a lower rate of violent competition. The level of sexual dimorphism in the fossil record indicates that our ancestors may have evolved a nonhierarchical, egalitarian social structure by 1.9 million years ago.<sup>9</sup>

This makes sense, since the new and dangerous environment our ancestors found themselves in required a great deal of cooperation. Individuals could no longer survive very well on their own; they were highly interdependent in the provision of food and protection from predators. This created a selection pressure for the skills and temperament for effective collaboration. As collaboration became part of the everyday environment, early humans likely had to choose their partners; this created a selection pressure for good partners, and against cheaters, laggards, and bullies. At the same time, this meant that early humans had to develop a self-image, imagine what others thought of them, and work at improving their reputations.<sup>10</sup> Public relations had evolved.

By 350,000 years ago, the first signs of cumulative cultural evolution appear in the form of stone tool technology. Our ancestors began to produce a variety of stone blades using complex techniques. These tools varied by region, as ideas spread from place to place and improvements and local adaptations were made. 100,000 years ago, the first signs of

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<sup>9</sup> Doron Shultziner, "Genes and Politics: A New Explanation and Evaluation of Twin Study Results and Association Studies in Political Science," *Political Analysis* 21, no. 3 (2013): 331.

<sup>10</sup> Tomasello, *Natural History*, 37.

symbolic behavior emerge in the archeological record: ostrich-shell beads and red ochre for decoration.<sup>11</sup> Big brains, with their high metabolic costs, were paying dividends.

Language is harder to pin down in the archeological record – words do not leave fossils. However, there is good reason to believe that language developed early in our evolutionary history. The radical environmental changes our ancestors faced 2.5 million years ago created a strong selection pressure for something to help us adapt. It is likely that a higher level of cooperation was the solution “favored” by natural selection, and cooperation requires effective communication. Advances in communication probably began with pointing, directing the attention of others to a relevant feature of the environment. Pantomiming is a natural adjunct to pointing, but this requires the communicator to correctly imagine what others are likely to infer from the pantomime. This kind of communication can only work between people who share common understandings and goals – it requires joint intentionality, and a theory of mind.<sup>12</sup> “What is she likely to think when I point in the direction of that watering hole?” “If I bare my teeth and make a scratching gesture, will she realize that I am warning her about lions drinking there?”

Ingenious experiments with our primate relatives have revealed that great apes have not evolved a sense of joint intentionality. While they have many social-cognitive skills they can use to understand the intentional actions of others, they cannot understand that different individuals can have different perspectives on the same thing. Unlike human children, they cannot engage in joint collaborative activity; they cannot imagine a “we” that

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<sup>11</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Tomasello, *Natural History*, 5.



is focused on achieving a joint goal.<sup>13</sup> Humans have evolved a unique social intelligence that allows us to imagine what others are thinking, make inferences about their communicative acts, and accurately predict what inferences others will make about our communicative acts. We alone can use inferences to share information with accuracy, and coordinate our intentions and actions to achieve joint goals.<sup>14</sup>

As this early form of point-and-pantomime language evolved, signs could become conventionalized within a group. As in the game of Charades, where touching the ear is commonly understood to mean “sounds like,” certain gestures came to have commonly understood meanings. These gestures would have been less vulnerable to misinterpretation, and could be combined to convey ever more complex messages.<sup>15</sup> As groups became bigger and sometimes competed with each other, living in a group became an overarching collaborative activity in its own right – and the traditions, practices, and technologies of the group became a culture. Standardized gestures could easily be replaced by vocal sounds, and language became part of culture.<sup>16</sup> After a long period of evolution, evidence suggests that human language reached its current state of development between 150,000 and 50,000 years ago.<sup>17</sup>

By the time our species, *Homo sapiens*, emerged in Africa no further than 500,000 years ago, our hominid relatives had spread throughout much of the world.<sup>18</sup> Ours was one of several hominid species enjoying massive success; the blind gambit evolution played

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples, and Languages* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2001): 60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 58, 84.

with a highly intelligent, social, and cooperative simian had paid off. Around 100,000 years ago, the newest hominid – us – began its first migration out of Africa. However, our first attempted migration seems to have been stopped short by our Neanderthal cousins in the Levant region of West Asia, and we subsequently nearly went extinct. From 90-60,000 years ago we evolved ever more complex and coherent social groups and more extensive trading networks, possibly also developing the first religions.<sup>19</sup> This new and improved *Homo sapiens* then made a second migration from Africa – and in relatively short time, we had eliminated (or partially assimilated through interbreeding) all other hominids and colonized nearly the entirety of the planet.<sup>20</sup> From around 40-10,000 years ago, cultural evolution again picked up its pace. Technology began to develop ever faster, long-distance alliances and trading networks were formed, social diversification increased, group identities sharpened, and we began to symbolically record information.<sup>21</sup>

We turned out to be a runaway success, but our success came at a price: a “bad smell of extinction follows *Homo sapiens* around the world.”<sup>22</sup> As our species colonized the planet, big species started to disappear one after another: mammoths, woolly rhinos, giant sloths. Our social intelligence, cooperativeness, and technology improved our hunting abilities so much that we inadvertently killed off dozens of animal species we had once relied on for food. (Later, our runaway success with farming would destroy soil quality and devastate agricultural civilizations.) These, Robert Wright calls “progress traps” – our

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<sup>19</sup> Matt Rossano, "The African Interregnum: The “Where,” “When,” and “Why” of the Evolution of Religion," in *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behavior*, ed. Eckart Voland and Wulf Schiefenhövel, 127-141 (Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2009): 127-128, 138.

<sup>20</sup> A greater level of intra- and intergroup cooperation among *Homo sapiens* compared to the Neanderthals may have been the deciding factor in the latter’s demise (Fuentes, 2013, 87).

<sup>21</sup> Ofer Bar-Yosef, "The Upper Paleolithic Revolution," *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2002): 363-393.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2004): 37.

tendency to make progress so fast that we end up trapping ourselves with the consequences of our own success.

Starting around 12,500 years ago, the wildly oscillating global climate finally began to stabilize.<sup>23</sup> As average temperatures rose, ice withdrew, the climate became more regular and predictable, and as carbon dioxide increased in the atmosphere, farming became a viable subsistence strategy.<sup>24</sup> While prior to the dawn of agriculture, we had been “egalitarian anarchists”<sup>25</sup> living in small groups without any sort of domineering leader, the advent of sedentary agriculture changed that.<sup>26</sup> Not all farming societies embraced hierarchy (or social stratification) and inequality, and some that did went back to the traditional egalitarian ways.<sup>27</sup> But agriculture relaxed the economic strictures and modified the social logic that originally led to our egalitarian social structure around two million years ago.<sup>28</sup> The food surplus sedentary agriculture readily produced allowed for the evolution of more hierarchical systems of social organization; in fact, hierarchy and even slavery seemed to have been a functional necessity for agricultural societies.<sup>29</sup> By around

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<sup>23</sup> Doron Shultziner et al., "The Causes and Scope of Political Egalitarianism During the Last Glacial: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective," *Biology & Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2010): 323.

<sup>24</sup> Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery, and Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012): 122-123.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending, *The 10,000 Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2009): 105.

<sup>26</sup> Some have argued that elaborate ritual burial sites well older than 12,000 years provide evidence for hierarchical societies prior to the dawn of agriculture. Whether they provide evidence for hierarchy or something else entirely is contested. For instance, David Wengrow and David Graeber argue that they most likely evince recognition, respect, or fear for physically anomalous individuals; and that pre-agricultural human societies may have alternated between forms of hierarchy and egalitarianism. “Clearly there is no single interpretation that accounts for the full range of Upper Palaeolithic burial practices, which are both diverse and widely separated in time and space. But seeing them as evidence for hereditary systems of social ranking – as has generally been done – seems to us the most improbable interpretation of all.” (Wengrow and Graeber, 2016, 605)

<sup>27</sup> Ian Kuijt, "People and Space in Early Agricultural Villages: Exploring Daily Lives, Community Size, and Architecture in the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 19, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>28</sup> Kim Sterelny, "Cooperation in a Complex World: The Role of Proximate Factors in Ultimate Explanations," *Biological Theory* 7, no. 4 (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Morris, *Foragers, Farmers*, 57-67. “In each of the areas in where agriculture was invented, people seem to have got by for a good three or four millennia without the help of governments that monopolized legitimate violence, but in every case, by the time that energy capture rose above about 10,000

9,000 years ago, “achievement-based” societies begin to appear in the archeological record. Achievement-based societies allowed some members to gain and enjoy higher status than others on the basis of their skills in warfare or religious ritual. From achievement-based societies developed societies based on *hereditary* rank. The Lucky Sperm Club was born. Finally, hereditary rank societies were sometimes violently merged by an ambitious ruler to form a kingdom, the first of which appeared around 5,000 years ago.<sup>30</sup> “History” begins here – and only here does Luther’s view of the human world as intrinsically evil and bloody begins to apply.

Viewed from this long perspective, human history and *recorded* history seem very discordant. For a large part of hominid history, including that of *Homo sapiens*, we lived in small, mobile, egalitarian bands. At the dawn of recorded history, however, we were a species split between traditional societies and strangely hierarchical, sedentary mega-groups. The new groups – the rank societies and kingdoms – could not stray too far from our evolved nature for very long, however. By 2,500 years ago (or 500 BCE, the “Axial Age”), civilizations from China and India to Greece developed similar systems of ethics that reinstated, at least normatively if not in practice, traditional forms of equality, altruism, and cooperation.<sup>31</sup> Throughout recorded history – the fraction of human history beginning after

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kcal/cap/day and towns grew past about 10,000 souls, a few people had taken charge. This happened somewhere around 3500 BC in Mesopotamia, 2500 BC in the Indus Valley, 1900 BC in northern China, and 100 BC in Mesoamerica and the Andes. ... Moral systems conform to the requirements of energy capture, and for societies capturing between 10,000 and 30,000 kilocalories per person per day, one of the most important requirements is acceptance of political and economic inequality.” (Morris, 2015, 65, 83-84)

<sup>30</sup> Flannery and Marcus, *The Creation*, 551-556.

<sup>31</sup> Klein, *Survival*, 180-182. The ideas of Confucius, Jesus, Buddha, and the like were, however, soon coopted by nearby states, blunting the force of their critiques. (Morris, 2015, 81-81)

sedentary agriculture – people struggled and fought against systems of hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> What, then, is our evolved nature – or more accurately, our evolved psychology?

## ii. Evolutionary Psychology –

### what we know about how our minds came to be

*"All human activity that does not contribute, even indirectly, to testicular and ovarian arousal, to the meeting of sperm and egg, is contemptible... as well as everything that distracts us from the truly essential purpose of human life, which, in my opinion, is to satisfy desires. I see no other reason for our being here, spinning like slow tops in a gratuitous universe."*

- Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*

When Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection first came out, it quickly made an indelible impact on scientists in several fields, including psychology.<sup>33</sup>

Psychologists realized that if humans had been evolving for millions of years, and had branched off the tree of life from a common chimpanzee ancestor, then the key to understanding our minds could be found by studying our evolutionary history.

An evolutionary approach to psychology promises to reveal *ultimate* explanations for the way our minds work – “*why* do we think or act this way” – as opposed to *proximate*

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<sup>32</sup> Morris, *Foragers, Farmers*, 71-92; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Another way of looking at this development is “that as human beings began to be in a position to amass power and property in the agricultural age, forms of ideology set in that distorted real moral values, distortions that we are only now, in the age of science and extensive literacy, beginning to overcome” (Korsgaard, 2015, 198). This would be gene-culture coevolution: genes largely producing brains with an innate distaste for being dominated and a desire for equality, then culture evolving away from such psychological features under economic and social pressures, and finally evolving back toward the biological-psychological starting point with the introduction of more powerful means of communication.

<sup>33</sup> Donald A. Dewsbury, "Charles Darwin and Psychology at the Bicentennial and Sesquicentennial: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 64, no. 2 (2009).

explanations, or “*what* is the immediate cause of our thinking or acting this way.” Ultimate explanations answer why the proximate cause evolved in the first place.<sup>34</sup> For instance, an immediate explanation for why we feel sexual jealousy might be that we fear the loss of companionship and tenderness of our partner. An ultimate explanation, however, would be rooted in evolution: since natural selection promotes behaviors that tend to make organisms leave more offspring, jealousy must have evolved because it tends to help prevent the loss of mating opportunities leading to offspring.<sup>35</sup> Of course, few if any of us actually think in the manner of ultimate explanations – we think in the manner of proximate explanations (“I feel jealous because I don’t want to lose my lover”). Nonetheless, the reason *why* we feel jealousy, or why jealousy exists in the first place, is evolutionary. It must have evolved because it tended to increase the number of offspring had by millions of our ancestors. (Darwin himself was one of the first to realize that human sexuality was fundamentally shaped and molded by evolution.)<sup>36</sup>

Sexuality may be low-hanging fruit for evolutionary explanation; after all, natural selection is all about survival and sex. Clearly, evolution would make its greatest impact on human sexuality. Yet evolutionary psychology has successfully explained several other, far less obvious features of human cognition. Take anger, for instance. We feel anger for many reasons in different circumstances, but very often we feel anger when we want or expect some thing or treatment from another, and we are not receiving what we want.<sup>37</sup> Assuming

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 53-55.

<sup>35</sup> Jaime C. Confer et al., "Evolutionary Psychology: Controversies, Questions, Prospects, and Limitations," *American Psychologist* 65, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>36</sup> David M. Buss, "The Great Struggles of Life: Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Psychology," *American Psychologist* 64, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>37</sup> Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology: New Perspectives on Cognition and Motivation," *Annual Review of Psychology* 64 (2013): 223-224; C. Daniel Batson et al., "Anger at Unfairness: Is it Moral Outrage?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37, no. 6 (2007).

that anger evolved as a mechanism to help us get what we want – most often, something to help in the quest for survival and sex – evolutionary psychologists ran experiments to see what factors increased the occurrence of anger in conflicts of interest. They hypothesized that anger would come more easily to those with greater bargaining power, as a way to tip the scales in their favor. Since greater bargaining power can come in several forms, they chose two easily-measurable characteristics to test: upper-body strength in men, and attractiveness in women. They found that stronger men and more attractive women were more prone to anger, felt entitled to better treatment, and tended to prevail in conflicts of interest more than weaker men and less attractive women.<sup>38</sup>

Another counterintuitive finding revealed by evolutionary psychology concerns “change blindness,” the phenomenon that we very often fail to notice changes in our visual scenes, especially when focusing on an unchanged aspect of it. For instance, if we look at two photos, one of which has been doctored to add or remove some physical feature of the scene, we very often fail to notice any changes between the two. Evolutionary psychologists hypothesized that we would demonstrate less change blindness to animals, since ancestrally animals have provided food and threatened death and so would be an important part of the survival-and-sex evolutionary equation. Experiments confirmed this hypothesis: we notice changes involving animals to a far higher degree than other elements of a scene, including cars. Even though in our modern environment cars are far more dangerous than animals, our minds evolved over millions of years when other animals were common and important sources of both danger and food, but cars did not exist.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 206.

These examples get to the heart of evolutionary-psychological reasoning. The environment in which our species evolved – called the “environment of evolutionary adaptation” or EEA – was vastly different than our modern environment, and so our psychology should be better adapted to the EEA than our contemporary environment. The EEA is not a particular point in time and space, like Central Africa 1 million years ago or South Asia 40,000 years ago, but a sort of statistical aggregate of environments and selection pressures that existed over millions of years of our ancestors’ evolution. These environments produced the majority of our psychological *adaptations*, evolved features which increased our ancestors’ survival and sexual opportunities. They also produced *exaptations*, features which evolved under one selection pressure that persisted and then were coopted for another purpose. An example of an exaptation would be birds’ feathers, originally evolved under selective pressure to provide warmth, and later coopted to aid in flight; another would be the pleasure we feel when beholding an attractive person, originally evolved under selective pressure to reproduce with healthy mates, and later coopted to help advertisers sell products. *Spandrels* are non-adaptive or even maladaptive byproducts of an adaptation produced by evolutionary selection – most of human culture can be considered to be spandrels, byproducts of selection pressure for larger brains capable of social learning, cooperation, and flexible behavior. While large brains are certainly adaptive, many of their contents are nonadaptive (like modern art) or even evolutionarily maladaptive (like celibacy).<sup>40</sup>

Human personality is an interesting example of how evolution can produce adaptations, exaptations, and spandrels – and how difficult it can be to disentangle the

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<sup>40</sup> David M Buss et al., "Adaptations, Exaptations, and Spandrels," *American Psychologist* 53, no. 5 (1998): 536.



three. Across cultures, people vary in what are called the “Big Five” personality variables: extraversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. If any one of these were purely adaptive, and their opposites (introversion versus extraversion, for example) maladaptive, then we would not expect to see the variation in personality we see today – evolution would have driven the maladaptive variants to extinction, and the adaptive variants to saturation. Because we do see a great deal of variation in personality between different people, we must conclude that each of these variables and their opposites are adaptive (or at least not maladaptive) in some circumstances and environments. Since the physical and cultural environments humans inhabit are so different and varying, evolution has produced a stable variety of personality types instead of just one.<sup>41</sup> They could all be adaptations, or potentially a mix of adaptations, exaptations, and spandrels.

### **iii. The evolutionary psychology of morality**

The evolutionary logic that produced our minds, along with all animals and plants, is profoundly amoral. Moral considerations play no role in it; the only driving forces are sex and survival. Whether evolution will favor a new trait or psychological tendency depends ultimately only on the extent to which that trait or tendency tends to provide an organism more sex, or longer survival (for more sex). This is the core of evolutionary “fitness”: being able to produce more surviving offspring, who in turn produce more surviving offspring of their own. It is not as though evolution actively “selects” sex-and-survival promoting

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel Nettle, “The Evolution of Personality Variation in Humans and Other Animals,” *American Psychologist* 61, no. 6 (2006): 622.

behavior; rather, sex-and-survival promoting behavior tends to outlast, out-reproduce, and crowd out behaviors that do not lead to as much sex and survival.

Hence certain behaviors, like altruism and homosexual sex, are strange outliers and explanatory challenges for evolutionary reasoning. Altruism (to be discussed in greater detail later) seems like it could not possibly arise from evolution – after all, if a genetic mutation causing altruistic behavior arose in any species, it stands to reason that selfish individuals could take advantage of altruists to increase their own sex-and-survival fitness at the expense of the altruists, driving them extinct. In much the same way, a genetic mutation causing a slower running speed in gazelles would surely drive the slower gazelles to extinction as they are feasted on by grateful lions.

Homosexual sex, which has been documented in hundreds of species, is another evolutionary puzzle. Would not a mutation causing animals to engage in nonprocreative sex soon be driven to extinction? Not necessarily; there are now several theories as to how evolution may have produced homosexual behavior.<sup>42</sup> For one, if homosexual pair bonding tends to produce more resources for heterosexual siblings, then genes for homosexuality could survive and spread. Although the homosexual couple would not pass on their own genes, in this “kin selection” scenario they would be helping to pass on the 50% of genes they share with their siblings by providing them with resources, care, or protection.

Homosexuality may also be an exaptation of high sexual responsiveness: genes that promote hypersexuality may spread due to their promotion of more procreative sex, even if they also promote nonprocreative sex. Another possibility is that same-sex intercourse

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<sup>42</sup> Nathan W. Bailey and Marlene Zuk, "Same-sex Sexual Behavior and Evolution," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 24, no. 8 (2009).

acts as a kind of social glue, helping to form bonds and alliances that increase members' fitness overall, as is seen in dolphins.

While altruism and homosexuality are examples of phenomena that seem to pose a challenge to evolutionary reasoning, all sorts of morally abhorrent behavior are easily explainable. For instance, infanticide is understandable as a way for males (in species where a few males dominate reproduction) to maximize their own reproduction by eliminating rivals' offspring and making females available for being impregnated with the killer's own offspring.<sup>43</sup> Violence of all sorts is a perfectly reasonable evolutionary adaptation, as it can help males in particular to defeat rivals for sex or food.<sup>44</sup> Even war has been explained by the same evolutionary logic; and human males seem to have an innate (if unconscious) psychological connection between sex and violence.<sup>45</sup> Our psychology may still have the marks of millions of years' experience that killing males in other groups leaves females behind who are sexually available. Sexually "available," even if unwilling: rape, a phenomenon present in other species as well as humans, is likely to be another

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<sup>43</sup> However, across species females are not merely passive victims of males who reduce female fitness (by killing their infants) to increase their own. Evidence shows that in species where males have evolved to commit infanticide, females have evolved countering strategies, like "paternity dilution": mating with many males so that no one male can be certain that an infant is his offspring or another's (Lukas and Huchard, 2014). For instance, female chimpanzees are estimated to copulate between 400 and 3,000 times per conception, with all or as many as possible of the males in her band (Wade, 2014, 42-43).

<sup>44</sup> James R. Liddle et al., "Why Can't We All Just Get Along? Evolutionary Perspectives on Violence, Homicide, and War," *Review of General Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2012); Christopher J. Ferguson and Kevin M. Beaver, "Natural Born Killers: The Genetic Origins of Extreme Violence," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 5 (2009).

<sup>45</sup> David J. Anderson, "Optogenetics, Sex, and Violence in the Brain: Implications for Psychiatry." *Biological Psychiatry* 71, no. 12 (2012); Lei Chang et al., "The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships: The Mating-Warring Association in Men," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 7 (2011). Chang et al. at times reason beyond what the available evidence allows, however: *warfare*, as opposed to violence, is a recent (10,000 years) development (Ferguson, 2013a, 2013b; Haas and Piscitelli, 2013).

unfortunate product of amoral evolutionary logic.<sup>46</sup> This amoral logic is, essentially: do whatever spreads your genes at the expense of others.

Yet the same amoral logic that can produce infanticide, war, and rape is also the logic that can produce morality itself. Remember that altruism<sup>47</sup> is a challenge for evolutionary reasoning to explain, since selfish exploiters would seem destined to drive altruists to extinction. Remember also that intense cooperation is the key trait that differentiates our species from our closest relatives.<sup>48</sup> In order for altruism and cooperation to evolve, such behaviors would have to benefit an organism's so-called "inclusive fitness," that is, the organism's relatives. Through kin selection, altruism and cooperation could evolve because even a fitness-sacrificing individual would be increasing the fitness of relatives who share many of the individual's genes.

However, this is not the only way. Humans have an innate tendency to form groups, and altruism and cooperation can readily evolve so long as they first emerge within a group context; that is, they benefit group members.<sup>49</sup> Then, given favorable conditions in terms of group size and competition, even evolutionary anomalies like altruism and cooperation can be favored by natural selection. Human morality – which has a universal core across all cultures, including variations on the Golden Rule – then is a set of adaptations that *allows*

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<sup>46</sup> William F. McKibbin et al., "Why Do Men Rape? An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective," *Review of General Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>47</sup> Altruism in the evolutionary literature is generally defined as an action that produces a benefit for another person while incurring a cost for the actor. Hence even if the altruistic actor can also be said to benefit from improved reputation or positive feelings, the action would still be defined as altruistic. Of no interest or relevance here are semantic quibbles over "altruism" in which the concept is defined out of existence by requiring a "pure" form of altruism in which the actor receives no benefit of any (even highly imaginative) sort whatsoever.

<sup>48</sup> The *scale* of cooperation is what differentiates us. Chimpanzees and bonobos also engage in cooperation with nonrelatives, just at a lower scale (de Waal, 2013, xiii).

<sup>49</sup> This sort of group selection has been shown to be mathematically equivalent to kin selection theory (Richerson and Boyd, 2008, 202-203).

for altruism and cooperation to flourish. While evolution often produces the most immoral of behaviors, it has also produced the very innate sense by which we now judge these behaviors to be immoral in the first place.<sup>50</sup>

Human morality, which ultimately evolved to foster in-group cooperation and altruism, is made up of proximate causes: feelings like love, empathy, guilt, and shame that push us to act in a manner consistent with our morality.<sup>51</sup> Evolution, in its typically amoral manner, seems also to have produced a small subset of humans, psychopaths, without some of the feelings that undergird morality.<sup>52</sup> Psychopaths are generally quite charming and glib, while exhibiting manipulation, dishonesty, callousness, aggression, irresponsibility, promiscuity, and parasitism.<sup>53</sup> Instead of being a maladaptive mental disease or disorder, evidence shows that psychopathy may likely be an evolutionary adaptation that exploits the existence of cooperative altruists in human groups.<sup>54</sup> This is evident because psychopaths tend to disproportionately harm and exploit *non-relatives* – an evolutionarily sound, if profoundly immoral strategy – while those afflicted with true mental disorders typically do not show relatives any preferential treatment.<sup>55</sup>

#### **iv. What evolutionary psychology is, and is not**

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<sup>50</sup> Dennis L. Krebs, "Morality: An Evolutionary Account," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>51</sup> Robert Kurzban et al., "The Evolution of Altruism in Humans," *Annual Review of Psychology* 66 (2015).

<sup>52</sup> Lacking the emotional machinery that informs morality, those scoring higher on tests of psychopathy tend to reason through moral dilemmas using strict utilitarian logic (Bartels and Pizarro, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Martin L. Lalumière et al., "In Cold Blood: The Evolution of Psychopathy," in *Evolutionary Forensic Psychology: Darwinian Foundations of Crime and Law*, ed. Joshua D. Duntley and Todd K. Shackelford, 176-200 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Psychopathy may also be a continuous dimension, with only those on the extreme end being classified as psychopaths, and the rest of us falling toward the low end of the spectrum (Levenson et al., 1995).

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Brian Krupp et al., "Nepotistic Patterns of Violent Psychopathy: Evidence for Adaptation?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012).

This brief overview of evolutionary psychology and its (at times) surprising findings should also be complemented with a discussion of its limitations. For instance, evolutionary psychology can sometimes be confounded by cultural features, especially when those features have spread far and wide. Evolutionary psychologists have found that men in dozens of cultures have a preference for women with a certain waist-to-hip ratio similar to that of attractive movie stars, presumably because this ratio signals a high degree of fertility. However, it is also possible that this widespread preference is due to an equally widespread facet of culture, like Hollywood movies. When researchers tested the preferences of men in an isolated South American jungle tribe, they found that they actually preferred the body shape common among women of their tribe, not that of Hollywood stars.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, evolutionary psychologists have found that women across many cultures tend to prefer mates with money and status more than men do, which is hypothesized to arise from millions of years of evolutionary history in which high-status, resource-rich men were presumed to have been better caretakers of children.<sup>57</sup> However, the vast majority of cultures in the world today exhibit a stark wealth gap between males and females; hence a female preference for wealthy males may simply be a rational decision to help mitigate the effects of this gender gap in wealth. Experiments teasing apart the effects of evolutionary and cultural causes of this mate preference found that women enjoying prosperity do not exhibit any hard-wired preference for wealthy mates.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Marks, *What it Means to Be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2003): 154-155.

<sup>57</sup> See, however, the discussion later in this chapter on evidence that for the majority of hominid history, large status and wealth differentials between males most likely did not exist.

<sup>58</sup> Daniele Marzoli et al., "Environmental Influences on Mate Preferences as Assessed by a Scenario Manipulation Experiment," *PloS one* 8, no. 9 (2013): e74282.

It stands to reason, given the rapid climatic changes we experienced during the past few million years, that our psychology would have evolved to be as adaptable as possible. Our decision-making tendencies bear strong witness to this. Dozens of experimental studies in psychology and behavioral economics show that we are not at all the rational decision-makers imagined by neoclassical economists.<sup>59</sup> Instead, we display a great deal of flexibility in our decision-making strategies that is closely attuned to our environment. Children raised in unfavorable environments, whether exposed to malnutrition, head injuries, or poverty, tend to make riskier decisions; likewise, those low in “embodied capital” (qualities like intelligence, strength, or attractiveness that aid in competition for resources), also tend to make risky decisions.<sup>60</sup> The general rule is that those in situations of greater need take greater risks.<sup>61</sup> (Including when the “need” in question is to impress potential mates.)<sup>62</sup> If you had an extra \$100 and no immediate needs, the wisest option would be to find a relatively safe investment offering a reasonably-high rate of interest. However, if you only had \$100 but you needed to pay a gangster \$10,000 the next day or have your legs broken, then the wisest option would be to go to a casino and play roulette. Sure, that would be a risky option with only a small likelihood of success, but even a small chance of success is better than none at all. Similar degrees of environmental sensitivity are likely to characterize many other features of our evolved psychology.

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<sup>59</sup> E.g., Herbert A. Simon, "Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 79, no. 02 (1985).

<sup>60</sup> Sandeep Mishra, "Decision-Making Under Risk: Integrating Perspectives From Biology, Economics, and Psychology," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2014).

<sup>61</sup> This line of scientific reasoning fits well with the observation that in the United States, “the health of a baby born to an African-American teenager is on average better than the health of a baby born to an African-American woman in her twenties. Why? The environment of racism erodes health to such an extent that it makes a certain amount of sense to have your babies early if you’re going to have them.” (Lewontin and Levins, 2007, 315)

<sup>62</sup> Richard Ronay and William von Hippel. "The Presence of an Attractive Woman Elevates Testosterone and Physical Risk Taking in Young Men." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1, no. 1 (2010): 57-64.

Evolutionary psychology has attracted a fair amount of criticism – probably more than the average scientific theory, likely due to its unpleasant conclusions. Some criticism has been constructive, engaging with experimental and other data to suggest alternate hypotheses.<sup>63</sup> Overall, however, evolutionary psychology is not a philosophy, still less a moral code.<sup>64</sup> It is little more than a hypothesis-generating mechanism attached to arguably the most productive scientific theory in history. It uses evolutionary logic to propose hypotheses about how our minds work, and then attempts to test them using experiments, surveys, and other data. Effectively critiquing evolutionary psychology is impossible without engaging with the empirical testing of evolutionary hypotheses. It is important to remember not only that evolutionary-psychological hypotheses are just that – hypotheses – but that when these hypotheses have generated a great deal of empirical support, the only way to argue against them is to offer a more thorough and satisfying alternate interpretation of the empirical results. In any case, the results of evolutionary psychology are impressive, and speak for themselves. Possibly the best evidence for a universal, core evolved psychology shared by all human beings is Donald Brown’s list of human universals: dozens upon dozens of traits, tendencies, practices, categories, and concepts of all sorts that have been found in all known human cultures.<sup>65</sup>

Although evolutionary psychology understandably provokes negative reactions, oftentimes this negativity is ill founded. Just because something *is* a certain way, does not mean that it *ought* to be. For example, just because a certain propensity to violence is part

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<sup>63</sup> David J. Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005). However, see also Edouard Machery and H. Clark Barrett, "Essay Review: Debunking Adapting Minds," *Philosophy of Science* 73, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>64</sup> Although, for young people going through a stage idolizing Nietzsche (or Ayn Rand in the U.S.), one could see how evolutionary psychology could be exapted for use as a fairly nihilistic philosophy.

<sup>65</sup> Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 435-439.



of our evolved psychology does not mean that we *ought* to commit violence. More generally, there is no good reason why the “goals” of mindless evolution – sex and survival – should be our own goals. There is an important distinction between attaining the highest level of evolutionary fitness, and maximizing human happiness and satisfaction.<sup>66</sup> The two may often be at odds. And perhaps they *should* be; as Thomas Huxley argued, “the ethical progress of society depends not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in *combating* it.”<sup>67</sup>

Additionally, evolutionary psychology is unlikely to be able to easily explain many features of modern human life. Even leaving cultural evolution aside for the moment, improvements in our understanding of genetics and epigenetics have complicated the simple picture of genetic inheritance predominant only decades ago. Whereas we once thought that genes rather directly coded for traits and features, we now know that most traits are polygenic (caused by a great variety of different genes acting in combination), and most genes are pleiotropic (causing a great variety of different effects). Many of the problem areas for evolutionary explanation – fitness-reducing yet relatively common phenomena like depression, autism, schizophrenia, etc. – may simply be the product of a great many genes which usually, whether individually or in different combinations, produce adaptive effects. These large assortments of genes may only produce nonadaptive or maladaptive effects (spandrels) in some combinations and under the influence of certain environmental factors, leaving the vast majority of the population having these same genes in other combinations and under different environmental factors to exhibit fitness-

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<sup>66</sup> Keith E. Stanovich, *The Robot's Rebellion: Finding Meaning in the Age of Darwin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 27.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*, Vol. 9, (New York: D. Appleton, 1894): 83. (Emphasis added.)

enhancing adaptations.<sup>68</sup> This would be similar to the case of sickle-cell anemia, which is caused by an allele that when paired with other variants (as it is most commonly) offers protection from malaria, but when paired with another copy of the same allele produces disease.

In any case, evolutionary psychology remains an important source of knowledge about the way millions of years of evolution have shaped our minds. In combination with other approaches to generate hypotheses, it offers the best picture available to understand not only the way our minds work, but *why*. Let us then return to the environment of evolutionary adaptation to see what other insights await.

#### **v. Human cooperation: How evolution managed to create and sustain it**

*"Whenever it ceases to be true that mankind, as a rule, prefer themselves to others, and those nearest to them to those more remote, from that moment Communism is not only practicable, but the only defensible form of society; and will, when that time arrives, be assuredly carried into effect."*

- John Stuart Mill, *Representative Government*

Given the selfish, amoral logic that characterizes evolution, the emergence of widespread cooperation in the human species is an anomaly that deserves attention. Edward O. Wilson explains:

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<sup>68</sup> Carolyn L. Funk, "Genetic Foundations of Political Behavior," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy et al., 237-261 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 242-243.

Natural selection at the individual level, with strategies evolving that contribute maximum number of mature offspring, has prevailed throughout the history of life. It typically shapes the physiology and behavior of organisms to suit a solitary existence, or at most to membership in loosely organized groups. The origin of eusociality, in which organisms behave in the opposite manner, has been rare in the history of life because group selection must be exceptionally powerful to relax the grip of individual selection. Only then can it modify the conservative effect of individual selection and introduce highly cooperative behavior into the physiology and behavior of the group members.<sup>69</sup>

Wilson should know; he gained renown through his studies of ants, a eusocial insect. The cooperativeness of ants was until recently thought to be exclusively explainable as the result of a higher degree of genetic relatedness between ants in a colony – as high as 75% under some circumstances, versus a genetic relatedness of 50% between parents and children in mammals, and even lower levels of relatedness between parents and grandchildren, cousins, etc.<sup>70</sup> This high relatedness and the theory of kin selection were thought to explain how evolution could have produced such high degrees of cooperation in ants and bees, without selfish freeloaders and cheaters emerging to sap its foundations. Hence Wilson's pithy reaction to Marxism: "Good ideology. Wrong species."<sup>71</sup> In other words, the level of cooperation Marxism prescribes is a great idea, but it would only work in a species like ants with their higher degree of relatedness. Humans, presumably, would

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<sup>69</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2012): 55.

<sup>70</sup> Edward O. Wilson and Bert Hölldobler, "Eusociality: Origin and Consequences," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 102, no. 38 (2005).

<sup>71</sup> Josh Getlin, "Natural Wonder: At Heart, Edward Wilson's an Ant Man. But It's His Theories on Human Behavior that Stir Up Trouble," *Los Angeles Times* (October 21, 1994).

be too selfish and competitive for socialism to work. However, science has progressed since then, and Wilson has changed along with it.<sup>72</sup>

Today we know that cooperation is written into our very DNA.<sup>73</sup> Cooperation, rather than competition, is our default state, as revealed by experiments in which people put under time constraints or primed to think intuitively act more cooperatively.<sup>74</sup> But unlike competition, which we share with apes and plenty of other animals, cooperation is a relatively new addition to our nature. Looking back at the past few million years of hominid history, we can see that it was a momentous addition: cooperation, and the intelligence it requires, drove us from being a marginal ape in East Africa threatened with extinction to the most powerful species on earth, who have gone to the moon and sent rockets to Mars. As has happened repeatedly during the overall course of evolution on earth over billions of years, a major new transition has occurred. Each of the eight major transitions evolution has produced in the complexity of living things have involved the emergence of a new form of cooperation and interdependence; and in each transition, the new form of cooperation was made possible by a new method of information transmission.<sup>75</sup>

Cooperation, therefore, is the first of the two key ingredients. Chimpanzees live in highly competitive societies, though they are capable of minor examples of cooperative behavior like group hunting of small monkeys. Even so, this may be only the barest form of cooperation, with individuals primarily trying to catch the prey for themselves, and

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<sup>72</sup> Compare Wilson's *Sociobiology* (1975), which brought him such anger from the contemporary Left, with his *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2012).

<sup>73</sup> David Cesarini et al., "Heritability of Cooperative Behavior in the Trust Game," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 10 (2008).

<sup>74</sup> David G. Rand et al., "Spontaneous Giving and Calculated Greed." *Nature* 489, no. 7416 (2012): 427-430.

<sup>75</sup> Tomasello, *Natural History*, 32, discussing Maynard-Smith and Szathmary, 1995.

secondarily preferring that another chimp capture it rather than it escape.<sup>76</sup> They seem incapable of forming joint goals, and uniting in joint action to achieve them.

Human infants, on the other hand, start to interact with others to achieve joint goals by the age of fourteen to eighteen months. In one series of experiments, infants at this age were paired with an adult and given the use of a two-person apparatus to obtain a toy. When the adult stopped playing her role out of the blue, the children reacted unhappily, and tried to reengage their erstwhile partners. Human-raised chimps, however, reacted differently: they simply ignored the quitting partner and tried to achieve the common goal on their own.<sup>77</sup>

By the time human children reach three years of age, they display commitment to achieving joint goals even in the face of temptations and distractions. In another experiment, pairs of three-year-olds were given a joint task to accomplish, and were promised a reward. For one of the children, the reward was given before the task was accomplished – yet the child persevered until the task was complete and the other child received her reward. Chimpanzees in the same experiment do not persevere in the joint task once they have received the reward – they quit, and leave their partner to fend for themselves.<sup>78</sup> This is likely due to the fact that while chimps can make *competitive* inferences – like inferring that there is food under a bucket a researcher is desperately reaching for – they, unlike human infants, cannot make *cooperative* inferences.<sup>79</sup>

Summarizing this research, Michael Tomasello writes that soon after children reach their first birthdays,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 52.

they come to engage with others in collaborative activities that have a species-unique structure and that do not, in any obvious way, depend on cultural conventions or language. These young children coordinate a joint goal, commit themselves to that joint goal until all get their reward, expect others to be similarly committed to the joint goal, divide the common spoils of a collaboration equally, take leave when breaking a commitment, understand their own and the partner's role in the joint activity, and even help the partner in her role when necessary. When tested in highly similar circumstances, humans' nearest primate relatives, great apes, do not show any of these capacities for collaborative activities underlain by joint intentionality.<sup>80</sup>

When cooperation was first emerging as a new hominid trait, it was likely helped along (or even "supercharged") by sexual selection. Just as sexual selection has produced the incredibly wasteful but ornate and beautiful peacock's tail, it may also have helped produce our penchant for cooperation. How? Because we find morality sexy. Indeed, researchers have found that humans find the following moral virtues sexually attractive: kindness, responsiveness to the needs of others, empathy, agreeableness, honesty, and heroism.<sup>81</sup> This reads like a list of requirements for effective cooperation; and once we started finding these qualities sexy, sexual selection could have driven them to levels not strictly justified by the cold genetic logic of natural selection.<sup>82</sup> Genes for altruistic and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey F. Miller, "Sexual Selection for Moral Virtues," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 82, no. 2 (2007): 109.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 98. But in any case, the cold logic of evolution may not clamp down so easily on cooperative, altruistic behaviors. If the gains to be had from cooperation are sufficiently high, they can be selected for even in the face of exploitation. In the highly beneficial realm of cooperation, stinginess is what is costly (Klein, 2014, 78-79).

cooperative behavior are fairly easy to spot (if less so than genes for a peacock's tail), making them easy targets for sexual selection.<sup>83</sup> While it would be hard to tell if our primate relatives similarly find morality sexy, we do know they share only a minor overlap with us in terms of our moral sense.<sup>84</sup>

Being a good cooperative altruist may bring more sex, but that is not the end of its relationship to pleasure. Neuropsychological experiments reveal that the same reward centers of the brain activated when receiving a gift are activated by behaving altruistically. And unlike receiving a gift, behaving altruistically results in brain signals reaching regions where emotional-bonding hormones circulate, as if to start an emotional bond with the beneficiary of our good deed.<sup>85</sup>

These may be the same emotional bonds described by selective investment theory, which proposes that altruism and cooperation were able to evolve outside of close family relationships through the formation of close social bonds. Within the context of these bonds, durably imprinted in our brains, we could evolve a capacity for significant long-term investment in the well-being of others. This is so because we could be assured that our partners in these bonds would do the same for us. (We see bonds of this sort all over: between married couples, lifelong friends, business partners, soldiers, etc.) From an evolutionary perspective, the closeness of these bonds effectively makes the individual

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<sup>83</sup> Aleksandr Kogan et al., "Thin-slicing Study of the Oxytocin Receptor (OXTR) Gene and the Evaluation and Expression of the Prosocial Disposition," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 48 (2011).

<sup>84</sup> Mark Sheskin and Laurie Santos, "The Evolution of Morality: Which Aspects of Human Moral Concerns Are Shared with Nonhuman Primates," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Evolutionary Psychology*, ed. Jennifer Vonk and Todd K. Shackelford, 434-449. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 446.

<sup>85</sup> Klein, *Survival*, 85-86. For a good discussion of the difficulty in interpreting neuroscientific findings, however, see Robert A. Burton, *A Skeptic's Guide to the Mind: What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York: Macmillan, 2013).

fitnesses of those involved into one single, interdependent fitness.<sup>86</sup> Clearly, there is always the threat that one of the partners will break the bond and seek his or her own individual advantage – some marriages end in divorce, friends become enemies, business partners cheat each other, and even soldiers sometimes become traitors. Yet so long as the benefits to be had from fitness interdependence exceeded the risk of betrayal, this phenomenon could be selected for by evolution. Also, since evidence suggests that we act more altruistically to those with whom we share several friends in common,<sup>87</sup> our social networks may help reduce the risk of betrayal by raising its cost (“If I betray one friend, I may lose several”).

## **vi. The evolution of language**

The joint intentionality that underlies cooperative behavior is also a key ingredient for human language. Speakers in a conversation need to have the joint intention of understanding each other – without this elementary form of cooperation, language could not evolve. Additionally, speakers need to imagine what their partner is thinking, and how their partner is likely to interpret what is said.<sup>88</sup> Our primate cousins’ inability to form joint intentions and think about the thinking of others prevented them from developing their own languages.

This difference between humans and other primates is even written into our faces: of the more than 200 species of primate, ours is the only one with highly visible eye direction.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Stephanie L. Brown and R. Michael Brown, "Selective Investment Theory: Recasting the Functional Significance of Close Relationships," *Psychological Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>87</sup> Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2009): 299.

<sup>88</sup> Tomasello, *Natural History*, 72, 75.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.



The whites of our eyes communicate which way we are looking, and children as young as twelve months tend to follow the eye direction rather than the head direction of others; apes, on the other hand, follow head direction only. Since we are advertising the direction of our gaze at all times, we must have experienced predominantly cooperative situations during the period of hominid evolution; otherwise, our visible eye direction would have been used competitively or exploitatively (“I see where he has spotted food, so I’ll get there first!”), and would likely have been eliminated by selection.

It is not, as the studies of human children and adult apes might suggest, that humans simply evolved a much higher degree of overall intelligence than our relatives. When two-and-a-half-year-olds were compared with chimpanzees and orangutans on tests of general intelligence, the human children only excelled in tasks relating to the social world, not the physical world.<sup>90</sup> Given the evidence, it seems that our ancestry shares with apes an evolutionary period in which competition led to fairly advanced forms of intelligence, similar to what chimpanzees display today. Then, unique to our lineage, a period of environmental stress due to climate change created a severe selection pressure producing joint intentionality, intensely cooperative activities, and primitive communication. As communication evolved into full-fledged language, ideas could spread more easily, and cultural evolution began to produce all of the unique features of modern human thought and reasoning.<sup>91</sup>

One of the most interesting features of human reasoning is that it seems to have evolved to support argumentation. In light of the vast amount of research into human

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 125-126.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 135-143.

reasoning and its flaws, one of the best-supported hypotheses is that its primary function is to argue effectively; even the many serious defects in human reasoning are actually beneficial for making arguments.<sup>92</sup> This applies to moral reasoning as well, in which we entirely miss the actual reasons we came to a moral judgment (which are largely hidden from conscious view), and instead search for the best reasons why someone else ought to agree with our judgment.<sup>93</sup> This form of argumentation likely first arose in a cooperative context, like group hunting, in which it benefits everyone for each individual to make the strongest case for their own opinion, so that group decisions can be made on the strongest available evidence.<sup>94</sup> In experimental models of similar scenarios, the most common outcome of this kind of group argumentation is “truth wins” – that is, the best option is usually chosen by the group.<sup>95</sup> This result may depend on the group having a diversity of opinions, and having an egalitarian structure.<sup>96</sup>

### **vii. Aggressive egalitarians**

*“Nature has left this tincture in the blood*

*That all men wou’d be tyrants if they cou’d”*

- Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Kentish Petition*

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<sup>92</sup> Mercier and Sperber, “Why Do Humans Reason?”; Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2013): 44, 75-76.

<sup>94</sup> Tomasello, *Natural History*, 110-111.

<sup>95</sup> Mercier and Sperber, “Why Do Humans,” 72.

<sup>96</sup> Pentland, *Social Physics*, 28-29, 88.

Cooperation, language, and reasoning laid the tracks for humans' runaway success. But evolution does not often make 180 degree turns: we could not have gone from a fully competitive, individualistic species to a fully cooperative, group-oriented species overnight. Instead, even as evolution was promoting the emergence of cooperation and altruism, the older tendencies toward competitiveness and exploitation remained present in our nature. For cooperation and altruism to emerge and remain rooted in our species, we had to find ways to ensure that our self-aggrandizing, selfish instincts were sidelined.

Enter the "aggressive egalitarians." Sounding like a PR firm's suggested name for Stalin's secret police, "aggressive egalitarian" is a term coined by evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm to characterize hominid societies during our evolution; and it is what allowed our ancestors to engage in cooperative hunting, especially for big game. All members of early human groups were considered equals, and if any one member attempted to make himself into a boss or chief, he would first be ridiculed. If that did not work, and the would-be boss continued to try wielding power over the group, he would be ostracized. If he persisted, he would either be expelled from the group – a potentially life-threatening punishment – or executed outright, usually by a family member after group consultations.<sup>97</sup> This is precisely what is observed among all extant hunter-gatherer societies today.<sup>98</sup>

Ancestral chimpanzees, on the other hand, were just as hierarchical as they are today, with alpha males bullying others to monopolize mates and food. Just as today, there would have been subordinate rebellions from time to time, when lower ranking chimps

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<sup>97</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (New York: Basic Books, 2012): 35.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-199.

gathered allies and attempted to overthrow an alpha – clearly, even in chimpanzee psychology there is a strong dislike of being dominated.<sup>99</sup> As hominids branched off from the lineage we share with chimps, we retained both the tendency for individuals to try to maximize their own power over others, but also the strong dislike of others dominating us. At some point, however, our dislike of others dominating us became stronger than the individual desire to wield power over others. (This also extended to sex equality.)<sup>100</sup> By 250,000 years ago, this was certainly the case: this was when our ancestors first took on large-game hunting as a regular occupation. Large-game hunting requires a high degree of cooperation, making it a practice vulnerable to free-riders or exploitative bullies: if someone tries to shirk their responsibilities, or take the largest share and dole out leftovers according to personal whim, cooperation falls apart.<sup>101</sup> “Why should I risk my life to kill a mammoth if this bully is going to take the best meat for himself?” If left unsuppressed by aggressive egalitarian social structures, such conflicts would have sapped the foundations of cooperative hunting, making it a functional impossibility and leaving rich sources of food untapped.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, while there is a wealth of evidence from climate science, anthropology, evolutionary biology, and archaeology to support the egalitarian model of

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<sup>99</sup> There is also evidence that chimpanzees have a sense of fairness and an expectation of equity, although less strong than in humans. Sarah F. Brosnan et al., "Mechanisms Underlying Responses to Inequitable Outcomes in Chimpanzees, *Pan troglodytes*," *Animal Behaviour* 79, no. 6 (2010).

<sup>100</sup> Mark Dyble et al., "Sex Equality Can Explain the Unique Social Structure of Hunter-Gatherer Bands" *Science* 348, no. 6236 (2015); Robert S. McElvaine, *Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

<sup>101</sup> Boehm, 2012, 151.

<sup>102</sup> When modeled mathematically, this form of social structure has been found to be more robust and resilient to outside shocks than the competitive, impersonal structures characteristic of modern market economies. (Pentland, 2014, 200-202)

our ancestral social structure, there is little convincing evidence for the existence of human hierarchies until quite recently.<sup>103</sup>

Although the exact timing of the development of aggressive egalitarianism is uncertain, there are only three possible alternatives:

One is that archaic humans had not progressed very far beyond ancestral behaviors in the matter of keeping down alphas and that large-game hunting led to radical political change and also to some severe initial conflict in putting down the poorly inhibited alphas. Another would be that before that, with earlier humans their coalitions would have partially reduced alpha power – in order to improve personal autonomy and probably also to increase the breeding opportunities of lower-ranking males – and that this would have made the transition to relying upon large game much easier. The third would be that decisive egalitarianism was already in place [possibly as early as 1.8 million years ago] when such hunting began and that in fact this might actually have been a prerequisite for large-game hunting to succeed.<sup>104</sup>

Regardless of the exact timing, it is clear that at some point during our history we evolved what has been called an “egalitarian syndrome,” a universal part of human psychology defined as “the complex of cognitive perspectives, ethical principles, social norms, and individual and collective attitudes promoting equality.”<sup>105</sup> This did not require

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<sup>103</sup> Shultziner et al., “The Causes.” What may have happened is that gods or spirits were given the role of alphas, and ancestors were made into betas, leaving living humans on the same egalitarian playing field – beneath supernatural beings who monopolized the top rungs of the overall social hierarchy (Flannery and Marcus, 2012, 59).

<sup>104</sup> Boehm, *Moral Origins*, 69-70, 155.

<sup>105</sup> Sergey Gavrillets, “On the Evolutionary Origins of the Egalitarian Syndrome,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 35 (2012): 14069.

a lucky mutation for some kid of saintly-altruist gene – it would have emerged from purely selfish tendencies, as is the rule in evolution, and did not require genetic relatedness on the part of cooperators.<sup>106</sup> Experiments in neuroscience have revealed that our concerns for equality are “implemented on a fundamental physiological level similar to breathing, heartbeat, hunger, and pain,” and that our ability to imagine the feelings of others is what drives the egalitarian syndrome.<sup>107</sup> Our brains even register signals of pleasure at punishing those who abuse the trust of others.<sup>108</sup>

The “aggressive” part of our egalitarian social structure would have not only supported the cooperation required for big-game hunting, but it would have left an impact on the gene pool. The most aggressive and domineering individuals – those who would have been excellent candidates for alpha male in ancestral chimpanzee groups – would have been exiled or killed, eliminating their genes. Only those who could suppress such urges in order to cooperate with their equals would have been left to pass on their genes. Likewise, inveterate cheaters and thieves would similarly have been selected against.<sup>109</sup> This sort of punishment is essential for cooperative behaviors to emerge and stabilize in the first place, and in modern societies the willingness to punish unequal behavior is correlated with the level of altruism in that society.<sup>110</sup>

The underlying evolutionary solution to the problem of free-riders or bullies came in the form of morality, the basic set of feelings or dispositions we all share that promote altruism, act as a social glue, and prevent dangerously anti-social impulses from destroying

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 14072.

<sup>107</sup> Christopher T. Dawes, "Neural Basis of Egalitarian Behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 17 (2012): 6480.

<sup>108</sup> Klein, *Survival*, 128-129.

<sup>109</sup> Boehm, *Moral Origins*, 153-4.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph Henrich, et al., "Costly Punishment Across Human Societies," *Science* 312, no. 5781 (2006).

the foundation of group cooperation.<sup>111</sup> Although the moralities of different cultures vary tremendously in their details, they all condemn murder, abuse of authority, cheating, lying, theft, and disruptive behavior.<sup>112</sup>

Yet viewed from today's perspective, aggressive egalitarianism can seem quite alien. Ever since hierarchy was reestablished ten to twelve thousand years ago,<sup>113</sup> our species has seen a massive growth in inequality, such that seemingly every week a new statistic comes out showing how a hundred, fifty, and maybe then a dozen people own more wealth than billions of the poorest. Since we are largely ignorant of our species' history prior to the most recent few percent of the total, we view hierarchy as normal, even part of our very nature. But it is only a recent anomaly for hominids like us.

### **viii. The other evolution**

*"Is evolution a theory, a system or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must bow and which they must satisfy henceforward if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow."*

- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*

Comparing the success of humans with that of all other animals, one can forgive the hubris of the first person to propose that we had been made by God in God's own image.

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<sup>111</sup> Boehm, *Moral Origins*, 161.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>113</sup> Vincent Falger, "Evolutionary World Politics Enriched: The Biological Foundations of International Relations," in *Evolutionary Interpretations of World Politics*, ed. William Thompson, 30-51. (New York: Routledge, 2001): 39.

We truly represent a quantum leap in evolution. “The human species is a spectacular evolutionary anomaly, so we ought to expect that the evolutionary system behind it is pretty anomalous as well.”<sup>114</sup>

As in all other major transitions in the history of evolution on our planet, the transition we represent was facilitated by greater cooperation, and a new means of transmitting information: language. Before us, the only form of information to have evolved on earth was that encoded in DNA. Once we developed language, however, another form of information began to display the telltale signs of an evolutionary process: our ideas.<sup>115</sup> The history of technology demonstrates in clear fashion how ideas evolve. The wristwatch is a good example: they are incredibly complex devices, but they were built slowly, step by step, over decades and centuries, with countless inventors adding one small improvement here, one clever innovation there. Even simple devices like forks or paper clips evolved in the same piecemeal fashion, with countless variations introduced during their development but only a few standing the test of time.<sup>116</sup> Here is not an *analogy* with biological evolution, or an equivalence; this is simply a separate instantiation of the same fundamental evolutionary algorithm.<sup>117</sup>

Unlike biological evolution, cultural evolution features both random and intentional forces. On the random side, there are forces like cultural mutation, in which an item of culture is misremembered or understood in a different way while being learned (similar to what happens in a game of telephone), and cultural drift, when certain ideas are lost at the

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<sup>114</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 15.

<sup>115</sup> See, for instance, Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*; Blute, *Darwinian Sociocultural*; Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution*; Runciman, *Theory of Cultural*; Shennan, *Genes, Memes*.

<sup>116</sup> Panati, *Panati's Extraordinary*; Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 51.

<sup>117</sup> Dennett, *Dangerous Idea*, 50-51.



death of the few people who know them (like when languages die or complex skills to produce older technologies are lost). Intentional or decision-making forces are those that are produced by acts of human choice, and they come in several forms. Guided variation occurs when ideas are modified in a particular direction as they are received and then passed on. The development of technology or science would be an example; we do not simply pass on the same idea, we seek to improve it. Another intentional force is biased transmission. There is content-based bias, whereby features of the idea itself make it more likely to spread, or one version of an idea becomes more common simply because it is easier to remember. For instance, instructions to make a lighter and shorter fishing rod versus a sturdier but heavier and longer one may spread more widely among people who have to walk long distances to fish. Frequency-based bias occurs when people copy the ideas that are most common within their culture. Fashion trends, or the decision by millions of people around the world to learn English as a second language, are examples of frequency-based bias. There is also the model-based bias, in which the ideas held by successful or prestigious people are preferentially copied<sup>118</sup> – this is the bias advertisers take advantage of when they pay celebrities to endorse their products. Lastly, even old-fashioned natural selection can act as a force in cultural evolution whenever the content of ideas influences the survival and reproductive success of those holding the idea. For example, some religious ideas can spread through natural selection if they influence believers to have more children than people subscribing to another religion, or none at all.<sup>119</sup> This is in fact what has been observed for conservative Christian denominations in

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<sup>118</sup> This force of cultural evolution was perhaps best described by the economist Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, in which the wealthy, the newly-wealthy, and those trying to mimic the wealthy adopt a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption.

<sup>119</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 69.

the United States over the past century: three quarters of their growth in numbers is due to the higher birthrate the denominations themselves encourage.<sup>120</sup> These intentional forces of cultural evolution have been identified and studied independently of evolutionary theory by social psychologists.<sup>121</sup>

The evolution of culture is powerfully affected by ecological and economic conditions. A study of rice-growing versus wheat-growing regions in China found that the choice of crop grown was a powerful predictor of whether the region was predominantly individualist or collectivist. Growing rice requires greater cooperation to be successful than growing wheat, and culture has evolved to adapt to this ecological and economic constraint.<sup>122</sup> Biological constraints, particularly disease-causing pathogens, have also been found to powerfully influence the evolution of culture. Geographical areas more prone to pathogens tend to be inhabited by conservative, ethnocentric, collectivist cultures, which tend to keep people tied to their groups (and less able to spread or be infected by diseases), while regions with fewer pathogens tend to be inhabited by individualist cultures.<sup>123</sup> Cultural evolution does not operate in its own isolated realm; and since the emergence of culture, biological evolution has not operated on its own either. Instead, the two evolutionary processes have been engaged in a dance, with developments in cultural

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<sup>120</sup> Thomas J. Bouchard Jr., "Authoritarianism, Religiousness, and Conservatism: Is "Obedience to Authority" the Explanation for Their Clustering, Universality, and Evolution," in *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behavior*, ed. Eckart Voland and Wulf Schiefelhövel, 165-180 (Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2009): 173.

<sup>121</sup> Alex Mesoudi, "How Cultural Evolutionary Theory Can Inform Social Psychology and Vice Versa," *Psychological Review* 116, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>122</sup> Talhelm, Thomas, "Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture," *Science* 344, no. 6184 (2014).

<sup>123</sup> Gordon Brown et al., "Personality, Parasites, Political Attitudes, and Cooperation: A Model of How Infection Prevalence Influences Openness and Social Group Formation," *Topics in Cognitive Science* (2015); Corey L. Fincher et al., "Pathogen Prevalence Predicts Human Cross-Cultural Variability in Individualism/Collectivism," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 275, no. 1640 (2008).

evolution influencing our biology, and our biology influencing culture.<sup>124</sup> Biology influences culture so profoundly that it is most often invisible. No culture can survive which prohibits its members from eating, tells its members they can fly from cliffs, or enjoins its members to marry bears. Biology, in other words, keeps culture on a leash.

At the same time, culture influences biology. The cultural practice of raising cattle has produced genetic mutations that allow adults to digest cow's milk (lactose intolerance was our species' default state), and the cultural development of language has modified the genes that build our larynx and auditory system. Cultural evolution can even obviate the need for biological evolution, as when humans first settled cold regions and instead of evolving fur, simply constructed clothing from the fur of animals who *had* biologically adapted to the climate.<sup>125</sup> And, as will be discussed later on, the genetic-cultural product of morality has influenced our biology as well.<sup>126</sup>

Gene-culture coevolution has even affected the biology of other species besides our own. Cultural products like pesticides have killed off some insects and increased others, and antibiotics have killed some bacteria while causing the evolution of newer, more deadly bacteria.<sup>127</sup> The dance between cultural and biological evolution creates chaotic, fractal-like complexities, making predictions about the future effectively impossible. For instance, a cholera outbreak is usually understood only as

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<sup>124</sup> See, for instance, Joan Y. Chiao and Katherine D. Blizinsky, "Culture–Gene Coevolution of Individualism–Collectivism and the Serotonin Transporter Gene," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2009).

<sup>125</sup> Kevin N. Laland, "How Culture Shaped the Human Genome: Bringing Genetics and the Human Sciences Together," *Nature Reviews Genetics* 11, no. 2 (2010): 141.

<sup>126</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 192-193.

<sup>127</sup> Lewontin and Levins, *Biology Under*, 89.

the coming of cholera bacteria to lots of people. But cholera lives among the plankton along the coasts when it isn't in people. The plankton blooms when the seas get warm and when runoff from sewage and from agricultural fertilizers feed the algae. The products of world trade are carried in freighters that use seawater as ballast that is discharged before coming to port, along with the beasts that live in that ballast water. The small crustaceans eat the algae, the fish eat the crustaceans, and the cholera bacterium meets the eaters of fish. Finally, if the public health system of a nation has already been gutted by structural adjustment of the economy, then the full explanation of the epidemic is, jointly, *Vibrio cholerae* and the World Bank.<sup>128</sup>

These sorts of cultural-biological complexities bedevil our efforts to explain our social world and devise intelligent policies. For instance, knowing that a pesticide kills a certain bug may lead us to believe that its use will control the pest (but this is an ecological claim, with its own complexities), and will thereby increase food production and alleviate hunger (these are economic and sociological claims, in the realm of culture).<sup>129</sup> Yet even if we knew that a new pesticide kills pests in the ecology of farms with 100% certainty, we cannot be sure that our increased food production will in fact have any effect on hunger worldwide – there are too many variables in the realm of culture to be certain. Wars could break out that make delivery of the extra food impossible; religious leaders may forbid followers from eating it; or the spread of a new ideology may alter the system of distributing the food that is already produced, ending hunger with no help from the new pesticide.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 204.

At its earliest stages in human history, cultural evolution helped produce the key anomalies that set us apart as a species: egalitarianism and cooperation. We share much the same innate social instincts as other animals that are grounded in kin selection and reciprocity; we too are closely bonded with our family members and can form strong bonds with unrelated friends and allies who help us as much as we help them. But in addition, cultural evolution produced a separate set of innate tribal instincts, allowing us to bond just as strongly with many unrelated people of the same tribe or other social group.<sup>130</sup> With family-strength bonds extended to all members of one's tribe, the scope for cooperative gains increased greatly. And since "tribe" is a fundamentally arbitrary way to distinguish one person from another, our hard-wired instincts have been repurposed – turned into exaptations – by cultural evolution over time. From family, to tribe, to kingdom, to nation (and possibly beyond, to humanity), our social instincts have been used to support ever larger groups, and make them cohere. It seems as though the great gains to be had from cooperation are an evolutionary force pushing us in the direction of ever greater unity as a species.<sup>131</sup> While there are major differences across cultures in how broadly group boundaries are drawn,<sup>132</sup> experimental studies have found that as levels of globalization increase, so too do individuals draw broader group boundaries, "eschewing parochial motivations in favor of cosmopolitan ones."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 196-197.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Random House, 2001).

<sup>132</sup> Shalom H. Schwartz, "Universalism Values and the Inclusiveness of Our Moral Universe," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 38, no. 6 (2007).

<sup>133</sup> Nancy R. Buchan, "Globalization and Human Cooperation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106, no. 11 (2009): 4138.

However, since cultural evolution proceeds exponentially faster than biological evolution, our hard-wired instincts can hardly catch up.<sup>134</sup> While cultural evolution has reintroduced hierarchy and inequality quite recently in our history, our genes have not caught up to make us comfortable with this new development. As two pioneers in the field of gene-culture co-evolution put it:

Our social instincts do not prepare us to submit to command or tolerate inequality. As a result, our social institutions should resemble a well-broken-in pair of badly fitting boots. We can walk quite a ways in the institutions of complex societies, but at least some segments of society hurt for the effort.<sup>135</sup>

## **ix. Recent evolution – in evolution, and our understanding of it**

The standard view in evolutionary psychology is that our psychology evolved during the period starting with the emergence of hominids, continuing through the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, and ending with the development of sedentary agricultural civilizations some 10,000 years ago.<sup>136</sup> There is, however, evidence that far from coming to a stop, our evolution as a species may in fact have sped up over the past 10-20,000 years. The high rates of population growth our species experienced during this period would itself predict an acceleration of evolution, as the number of mutations overall would increase along with a greater number of individuals, and high population growth makes it more likely that any

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<sup>134</sup> Laland et al., "How Culture Shaped," 139.

<sup>135</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not by Genes*, 230-231.

<sup>136</sup> See, for instance, Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 203.

adaptive mutations would spread to saturation.<sup>137</sup> In fact, techniques for uncovering recently-selected genes have found that the past 10-20,000 years have seen a significant increase in genetic evolution.<sup>138</sup>

Some of this recent selection seems to have been in the direction of domesticating us as a species. Since aggression generally does not work well in large civilizations, it seems as though the most aggressive among us have been weeded out especially fast during our most recent period of evolution.<sup>139</sup> Not only are aggressive individuals more likely to kill each other, but large civilizations are likely to reduce their numbers further by sending them off to die in wars, or having them executed for violent crimes. Additionally, those who found it harder to conform to social norms and restrain their aggressive impulses would be less likely to be chosen as mates, further reducing their numbers over time.<sup>140</sup> (This may help explain the historical trend away from violence – ancient societies experienced rates of violent deaths thirty times higher than those of the past century, even with its two world wars and countless smaller wars.)<sup>141</sup> As a result, our features softened – jaws reduced, faces flattened – changes like those seen in many of our favorite breeds of dog as we bred them to be friendlier and less aggressive. Less flatteringly, our brains have shrunk in size since the beginning of agriculture 10,000 years ago.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> John Hawks et al., "Recent Acceleration of Human Adaptive Evolution," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 52 (2007): 20755.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 20756-20757.

<sup>139</sup> Boehm, *Moral Origins*, 168.

<sup>140</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 211.

<sup>141</sup> Steven Pinker, "Decline of Violence: Taming the Devil Within Us," *Nature* 478, no. 7369 (2011). However, Pinker's reading of the *pre*-historical evidence has been debunked (Ferguson, 2013a, 2013b; Fry, 2013, 15-20). Instead of a consistent downward trend, there is an *N*-shaped curve: low levels of violence in pre-history, a massive spike beginning with the agricultural revolution, and then a gradual decline continuing into the modern era.

<sup>142</sup> Ann Gibbons, "How We Tamed Ourselves—and Became Modern," *Science* 346, no. 6208 (2014).

One recently-selected gene that plays a role in speech<sup>143</sup> may have contributed to the creative explosion of modern humans who spread out of Africa 50,000 years ago.<sup>144</sup> Even genes for lighter skin, apparent in populations living in northerly climates with less sun, appear to have originated very recently, after the beginning of agriculture. Lighter skin allows for vitamin D to be produced by ultraviolet radiation acting on the skin, which is a rather strangely plantlike way of provisioning this vitamin. Fresh meat contains plenty of vitamin D, however, so our ancestors in darker climates likely did not need to lose melanin until agriculture changed our diets by replacing calories (and vitamins) from meat with calories from plants (without vitamin D). Also, populations with a longer history of agriculture, with a longer exposure to a high-carbohydrate diet, are less susceptible to diabetes today.<sup>145</sup> Long-time farming populations have also been exposed to a greater variety of infectious diseases that come along with high population density, and as a result they have recently evolved more effective immune-system defenses than populations that remained hunter-gatherers.<sup>146</sup>

Studies of the genes of college students versus those who do not go to college revealed that college students' genes differ significantly in the areas associated with mathematical abilities, motivation, executive functions, and adjustment-related behaviors involving alcohol use and emotions.<sup>147</sup> Here, culture may be acting as an agent of natural selection; *if*, of course, college graduates reproduce at a different average rate than others.

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<sup>143</sup> Sarah A. Graham and Simon E. Fisher, "Decoding the Genetics of Speech and Language," *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 23, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>144</sup> Cochran and Harpending, *10,000 Year*, 63.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>147</sup> Chuansheng Chen et al., "Genotypes Over-Represented Among College Students Are Linked to Better Cognitive Abilities and Socioemotional Adjustment," *Culture and Brain* 1, no. 1 (2013).



This brings up an important point: recent selective pressures can only exert an appreciable effect if those whose genes are better suited to the pressure had more children. An important corollary to this requirement is that those who had more children would have needed genes that better accommodated the selection pressure of interest, or else evolutionary adaptation in reaction to that selection pressure would not have occurred. In other words, it is not enough to identify a selection pressure, note that one group tended to have more children than other groups, and then leap to the conclusion that the more successful group had *genes* that better equipped them to handle that particular selection pressure. This pitfall in reasoning is especially apparent in the realm of gene-culture coevolution. For instance, one hypothesis is that recent evolution during the Industrial Revolution produced people who were better adapted to and more capable of excelling under capitalist forms of economic organization.<sup>148</sup> The proposal goes that those whose genes facilitated a better business sense became rich, and had more surviving children and grandchildren than the poor, so that after several generations the population was largely composed of the offspring of the ancestrally-wealthy, innate businesspeople. Hence after a while, the entire population became better suited to capitalism, and this explains why today it is more competitive in the global economy.<sup>149</sup>

Leaving aside the glaringly obvious flaw that such a theory is entirely innocent of economic, political, military, and cultural history, there is a fundamental defect in its

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<sup>148</sup> Nicholas Wade, *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2014): 155-164.

<sup>149</sup> Theories such as this one bear a strong resemblance to eugenic theories popular in the 1920s that proposed that the rich became rich because they had better genes. Such theories became decidedly less popular – to the extent that a popular textbook had an entire chapter on such theories quickly removed – after the global stock market crash of 1929. The crash, of course, eliminated the wealth of many former millionaires, making the wealth-genes theory significantly less flattering for them (Marks, 2003, 121).

*evolutionary* logic. This is so because the traits that tend toward greater success in capitalism, and the genes that presumably contribute to such traits, may have had nothing whatsoever to do with the ancestral accumulation of wealth in the first place. For instance, those who had accumulated appreciable wealth a millennium ago in England may have done so thanks to a greater capacity for organized violence and predatory instincts, rather than any greater-than-average mercantile skill.<sup>150</sup> As generations went by, and inherited property was passed down to offspring, the wealthy class would comprise those “selected” for ancestral predation (not mercantile skill) as well as those of lower classes whose political and mercantile skills (plus social network position, luck, and other historical factors) allowed them to accumulate fortunes. Exactly what traits were conducive to rising from poverty and accumulating a fortune is an open question; and given the central role of the slave trade in generating the capital for Europe’s rise to prominence in the world, a psychopathic disdain for other people may have been just as much a “selected” trait as mercantile skill.<sup>151</sup> But it is unlikely that the traits (and family histories) helping to make fortunes in the feudal era are the same traits leading to success in business during the capitalist era.<sup>152</sup> Forces of social evolution, particularly economic and political institutions,

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<sup>150</sup> See, generally, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>151</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Raleigh NC: UNC Press Books, 1994).

<sup>152</sup> Gregory Clark and Neil Cummins, "Surnames and Social Mobility in England, 1170–2012," *Human Nature* 25, no. 4 (2014). While genetic factors may play a role, it would be surprising if there were gene-coded traits tending toward the achievement and maintenance of high status in such a variety of socioeconomic environments. The intergenerational staying power of wealth is a more likely culprit. "Initial status differences in surnames can persist for as many as 20–30 generations. Even more remarkable is the lack of a sign of any decline in status persistence across major institutional changes, such as the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, the spread of universal schooling in the late nineteenth century, or the rise of the social democratic state in the twentieth century. Status persistence measured in this way is just as strong now as in the preindustrial era." (Clark and Cummins, 2014, 518)

could account entirely for patterns of wealth within and between nations, without any influence from biological evolution.<sup>153</sup>

The most recently-selected (5-10,000 years ago) areas of the human genome are associated with the immune system, the cell cycle, DNA and protein metabolism, reproduction, and the brain. The recently-selected genes affecting the brain are linked to better school-related skills, but worse performance in several social, emotional, and cognitive tasks.<sup>154</sup> However, we do not yet know precisely how these genes affect development, and there is a very strong likelihood that the expression of such recently-selected genes is heavily influenced by environmental factors. Hence the implausibility of theories that propose a genetic cause (at least a sole or primary cause) for today's national differences in wealth and power.

Although it is certainly plausible to speculate that the rise of agricultural civilizations may have had something to do with group-level genetic differences, the historical record of such civilizations rising around the same time in far-flung locations (today's Egypt, India/Pakistan, China, Mexico, and Peru) tends to falsify such a hypothesis.<sup>155</sup> In addition, the genetic variability of modern humans is extremely low in comparison to our numbers – less than chimpanzees, for instance, even though there are far more humans than chimps.<sup>156</sup> What variability that does exist is not restricted to

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<sup>153</sup> Deniz Kellecioglu, "Why Some Countries Are Poor and Some Rich: A Non-Eurocentric View," *Real-World Economics Review* 52 (2010). Kellecioglu demonstrates that worldwide, the amount of melanin in peoples' skin correlates strongly with GDP per capita. The available evidence undermines genetic explanations, and points instead to history (or social and cultural evolution): European colonialism spanning the globe, implementing color-coded racist policies, and the use of changing economic policies that continually ensure a stark division between rich and poor nations.

<sup>154</sup> Chuansheng Chen, et al., "The 'Encultured' Genome: Molecular Evidence for Recent Divergent Evolution in Human Neurotransmitter Genes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Neuroscience*, ed. Joan Y. Chiao et al., 315-337 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>155</sup> Wilson, *Social Conquest*, 101-102.

<sup>156</sup> Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 142-143.

*between* human cultures; rather, “any small village typically contains about the same amount of genetic variation as another village located on any other continent. Each population is a microcosm that recapitulates the entire human macrocosm even if the precise genetic compositions vary slightly.”<sup>157</sup> Therefore, while genetic differences between groups *can* explain relatively superficial features like skin tone, lactose intolerance, or facial structure, they are highly unlikely to fully explain observed differences in social structures, economics, politics, or other such emergent characteristics.

This is particularly likely to be the case given what we are currently learning about the role of epigenetics in evolution and development. Epigenetics describes how variations in traits and behavior arise that are not strictly attributable to genetic variation.<sup>158</sup> In the past, the predominant view of how genes worked is that they were discreet portions of the human genome that directly coded for observable, “phenotypic” traits and behaviors. Each trait or behavioral propensity was thought to be caused by a gene that had been selected for, and each selected-for gene was thought to cause an adaptive trait or behavior. In other words, genes were selected for on the basis of how well the phenotypic effects they directly coded for worked out during the life of an organism: how well they conducted toward sex and survival. Also, an organism’s genes were thought to remain unchanged from birth to death, such that no amount of experiences in life could modify them before being passed on.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, Peoples*, 29.

<sup>158</sup> Frances A. Champagne, “Epigenetic Influence of Social Experiences Across the Lifespan,” *Developmental Psychobiology* 52, no. 4 (2010): 300.

<sup>159</sup> See, for instance, Evan Charney and William English, “Candidate Genes and Political Behavior,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 01 (2012): 12.

Today, research in epigenetics has radically altered our view of how genes work and evolve.<sup>160</sup> The most basic revelation is simply that the way genes express themselves is highly dependent upon environmental conditions: a gene “for” one trait in one environment may produce entirely different effects in another environment. More revolutionary for our understanding of evolution has been the discovery that epigenetic changes during the lifetime of an organism can be passed on to offspring. For instance, rat pups who have been licked and groomed extensively by their mothers develop into adults that are less easily stressed and more responsive to their offspring. This is due to epigenetics, not traditional genetic inheritance: while the licked-and-groomed pup is developing, epigenetic changes occur within their DNA that they then transmit to their offspring.<sup>161</sup>

Epigenetic effects have been found in humans as well. Smoking tobacco during pregnancy not only affects the directly-exposed offspring, but nicotine-linked disruptions of the pulmonary system are epigenetically transmitted to subsequent generations as well.<sup>162</sup> A study of the Dutch Hunger Winter during World War II found that six decades later, those who had suffered from malnutrition during this time displayed persistent epigenetic effects on a gene regulating growth and development.<sup>163</sup> The children of Holocaust survivors also display epigenetic effects of their parents’ trauma.<sup>164</sup> These sorts of trauma-induced epigenetic changes are often compounded by political and economic

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<sup>160</sup> Shapiro, *Evolution*.

<sup>161</sup> Gene E. Robinson et al., "Genes and Social Behavior," *Science* 322, no. 5903 (2008): 898.

<sup>162</sup> John S. Torday and Virender K. Rehan, "An Epigenetic 'Smoking Gun' for Reproductive Inheritance," *Expert Review of Obstetrics & Gynecology* 8, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>163</sup> Bastiaan T. Heijmans, et al., "Persistent Epigenetic Differences Associated with Prenatal Exposure to Famine in Humans," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 44 (2008).

<sup>164</sup> Rachel Yehuda et al., "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation," *Biological Psychiatry* (2015).

pressures in the cases of Native and African Americans in the U.S.<sup>165</sup> (In a dark irony, *social* evolution begins to create small epigenetic, *biological* differences between “races” which did not exist when the social construct of “race” was created.)

Social traits and behaviors are also affected by epigenetic changes. The highly social cichlid fish has an elaborate dominance hierarchy, and when an alpha male is removed from a group, a formerly-subordinate male quickly adopts dominant behaviors – during this time, not only does the new alpha change his body’s coloration, but genes involved in his brain begin to express themselves differently.<sup>166</sup> In humans, children born into low socio-economic status experience epigenetic changes linked to the emergence of a defensive, stress-reactant psychology, which may better prepare them for threatening conditions (while also increasing their likelihood of physical and mental illnesses). These changes may even have a transgenerational impact, with affected children’s epigenetic adaptations being passed on to their children as well.<sup>167</sup>

Therefore, theories of recent human evolution that rely on the older, simpler picture of genetic development and evolution are unlikely to be correct, or at the very least, cannot be directly tested until significant progress is made in genetics and epigenetics. The 2,500-year-old view of Confucius is more likely to be accurate: “Men’s natures are alike; it is their habits that carry them far apart.”<sup>168</sup> And, perhaps, the habits of their parents and grandparents.

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<sup>165</sup> Michelle Sotero, "A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research," *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2006); Shannon Sullivan, "Inheriting Racist Disparities in Health: Epigenetics and the Transgenerational Effects of White Racism," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>166</sup> Robinson et al., "Genes and Social Behavior," 897.

<sup>167</sup> Champagne, "Epigenetic Influence," 303, 306.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted in Pinker, *Blank Slate*, 142.

## x. So what? How evolution matters to today's societies

Biological evolution is pretty obviously the source of our species and its characteristics, from cooperativeness to aggression, from skin color to bone structure. But it is harder to imagine how the evolution of genes could have any effects on something as purely cultural as the realm of politics. Yet there is considerable evidence that biological evolution has made significant contributions to our political nature.

Perhaps the easiest or most direct way to test for the effects of genes on human behaviors and dispositions arises from a kind of natural experiment provided by identical and fraternal twins. Identical (monozygotic) twins come from the same fertilized egg and share roughly 100% of their genes,<sup>169</sup> while fraternal (dizygotic) twins come from two separate fertilized eggs and share roughly 50% of their genes, as do all siblings. Hence, the first place to look for genetic effects on any trait is in the differences and similarities between identical and fraternal twins. If a sample of identical twins correlate at a rate of 80% on a given trait (for example, if eight out of ten identical twins have the same favorite flavor of ice cream), and a paired sample of fraternal twins correlate at a rate of 40% on that same trait (only four of ten share the same favorite flavor), then we can estimate that *on the level of population* (not at the individual level), ice cream preferences are 40% heritable. In other words, 40% of the population-level variation in ice cream preferences can be linked to genetic heritability. The remaining 60% of variation can be ascribed to shared environmental influences (like the ice cream flavors their parents brought home),

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<sup>169</sup> However, recent research has challenged this assumption, as epigenetic changes over the lifetime may make identical twins' DNA diverge (Charney, "Behavioral Genetics," 12-14).

unique environmental influences (like one's unique friends and the influence of their flavor preferences), and measurement error (like when a survey question is interpreted differently from how the questioner intended). To disentangle the effects of shared versus unique environments, measurements are taken of common variables in twins' home environment to see how much variation can be explained by what they experienced in common at home.

Twin studies of political attitudes along a Left-Right dimension have consistently found heritable genetic factors to play a significant role. Opinions on political issues like pacifism, socialism, capitalism, foreign aid, gay rights, and federal housing were found to have an average heritability component of 32%.<sup>170</sup> Political ideology has been found to be 56% heritable, egalitarianism 50% heritable, and right-wing authoritarianism 48% heritable.<sup>171</sup> These ideological variables were found to share common genetic and environmental sources of influence with personality variables.<sup>172</sup> Forms of political participation have been found to be partly heritable, with estimates of 35% for attending protests, 41% for voting and contacting officials, 44% for financial contributions, and 52% for contacting government officials.<sup>173</sup> Even levels of social trust have been found to be heritable at rates between 30-40%.<sup>174</sup>

These sorts of results have also been found in cross-cultural studies, with heritability estimates of political ideology varying across countries but remaining

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<sup>170</sup> John R. Alford, et al., "Are Political Orientations Genetically Transmitted?" *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 02 (2005): 160.

<sup>171</sup> Carolyn L. Funk et al., "Genetic and Environmental Transmission of Political Orientations," *Political Psychology* 34, no. 6 (2013): 813.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 816.

<sup>173</sup> Christopher Dawes et al., "The Relationship Between Genes, Psychological Traits, and Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 892.

<sup>174</sup> Sven Oskarsson et al., "The Genetic Origins of the Relationship Between Psychological Traits and Social Trust," *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 15, no. 01 (2012).



significant at an average level of around 40%.<sup>175</sup> Environmental influences on political ideology were found to vary much more dramatically across countries.<sup>176</sup> Broadening the focus of twin studies by including extended family members in heritability estimates has produced much the same results.<sup>177</sup> Studies looking at the heritability of political attitudes over time have found that environmental influences play a stronger role during childhood, while genetic influences assert themselves to a greater extent after children have left their parents' home.<sup>178</sup> A rare study that investigated differences in heritability between rightwing and leftwing ideologies found that genetic influences on the development of leftwing ideology were more affected by the home environment, while genetic influences on the development of rightwing ideology were more affected by one's unique environment outside of the home.<sup>179</sup>

Overall, these studies seem to show that different sets of genes may create varying levels of susceptibility to particular political ideologies.<sup>180</sup> It is not as though these studies suggest the existence of a "socialism" gene that disposes people to be favorable to socialism, or a "federal housing" gene that makes people support the idea of the government providing low-cost housing for the poor. Rather, these twin studies suggest

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<sup>175</sup> Peter K. Hatemi, et al., "Genetic Influences on Political Ideologies: Twin Analyses of 19 Measures of Political Ideologies from Five Democracies and Genome-Wide Findings from Three Populations," *Behavior Genetics* 44, no. 3 (2014): 289.

<sup>176</sup> As the study's authors noted, "Such a finding is precisely what one should expect if the genetic pathways undergirding political ideology remain similar in people of relatively similar genetic ancestry, but emerge in different manifestations within different cultures and variegated political environments. Genetic influences on political ideology are not boundless" (Hatemi et al., 2014, 291).

<sup>177</sup> Peter K. Hatemi et al., "Not by Twins Alone: Using the Extended Family Design to Investigate Genetic Influence on Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 3 (2010): 810.

<sup>178</sup> Lindon Eaves et al. "Age Changes in the Causes of Individual Differences in Conservatism," *Behavior Genetics* 27, no. 2 (1997); Peter K. Hatemi et al., "Genetic and Environmental Transmission of Political Attitudes Over a Life Time," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 03 (2009).

<sup>179</sup> Inga Schwabe et al., "Genes, Culture and Conservatism-A Psychometric-Genetic Approach," *Behavior Genetics* (2015).

<sup>180</sup> Kevin Smith et al., "Biology, Ideology, and Epistemology: How Do We Know Political Attitudes Are Inherited and Why Should We Care?" *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 1 (2012): 28.

that genes have broad effects on our individual psychology and personality, which in turn make us more likely to adopt one political position rather than another – for instance, genetic variations that affect one’s sensitivity to fear may affect our reactions to unknown outsiders, making us more likely to take one or another stance on the issue of immigration policy.<sup>181</sup>

After twin studies confirm that there is some degree of genetic heritability underlying political attitudes, the next step is to attempt to locate specific genes that may produce these population-level effects.<sup>182</sup> The first step in this process has been to analyze portions of many people’s genomes, identifying genetic similarities that correlate with similarities in political ideology. Many such regions have been identified in one study, but only one area with a reliably high correlation contained any gene known to be associated with human social behavior.<sup>183</sup> Another way to proceed is by choosing a gene known to be associated with social behavior, and testing a sample of people with and without it to measure differences in their behavior. This has been done for a gene associated with brain function, and another study found that those with a particular variant of the gene displayed more altruistic behavior than those without it.<sup>184</sup> Studies of this sort can also test for environmental influences on genes. For instance, a gene associated with novelty-seeking behavior was found to correlate with leftwing political ideology, and that this effect

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<sup>181</sup> Peter K. Hatemi and Rose McDermott, "The Genetics of Politics: Discovery, Challenges, and Progress," *Trends in Genetics* 28, no. 10 (2012): 529; Smith et al., "Biology, Ideology," 18.

<sup>182</sup> Zoltán Fazekas and Peter K. Hatemi, "Genetic and Environmental Approaches to Political Science," in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Robert A. Scott and Stephen M. Kosslyn (New York: Wiley Publishing, 2015), doi: 10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0342; Nicholas Martin et al., "A Twin-Pronged Attack on Complex Traits," *Nature Genetics* 17 (1997).

<sup>183</sup> Peter K. Hatemi, et al., "A Genome-Wide Analysis of Liberal and Conservative Political Attitudes," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 01 (2011): 276.

<sup>184</sup> Martin Reuter et al., "Investigating the Genetic Basis of Altruism: The Role of the COMT Val158Met Polymorphism," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* (2010): 5.

increased as a function of the number of friends an individual had as a child.<sup>185</sup> Hence, it would seem that this gene may predispose people to seek out new experiences, and if a holder of this gene has several friends during childhood who provide exposure to a variety of opinions and perspectives, there is a greater likelihood that the person will develop a leftwing political ideology.

However, the conclusions of these types of studies are not as straightforward as it might seem. A fundamental part of the problem is the incredibly complex way that genes work. For instance, an animal as simple as a fruit fly, with only 100,000 neurons compared to our 100 billion, has at least 266 separate genes that code for proteins known to be involved in varying levels of fruit fly aggression – yet the heritability of aggression in fruit flies is only about 10%.<sup>186</sup> Causation in biological systems runs in two directions, upward from the genome and epigenome and downward from the environment, organism, organs, tissues, and even cells, with feedback and feed-forward loops between different levels.<sup>187</sup> Also, since the genome is so large, finding correlations between genes and traits is highly likely to occur simply due to chance, and extremely large sample sizes may be required to find anything truly significant.<sup>188</sup> Hence capturing individual genes' contributions to the

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<sup>185</sup> Jaime E. Settle et al., "Friendships Moderate an Association Between a Dopamine Gene Variant and Political Ideology," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 04 (2010).

<sup>186</sup> This also throws into question the conclusions of twin studies, discussed later:

Absurdly high estimates of heritability of behavior (of the kind typically obtained by classical twin studies) are incompatible with phenotypic plasticity. Were we to take an estimate of, say, 69% heritability of aggression in humans seriously (versus 10% in [fruit flies]), then we would have to conclude that, even though humans possess the most plastic, responsive, adaptive organ we know of in the natural world (the human brain), they are less developmentally influenced by and responsive to their environment than flies. Lacking the ability to adapt to their environments to such an extent, *homo sapiens* would long ago have become extinct. (Charney and English, 2013, 392)

<sup>187</sup> Charney and English, "Candidate Genes," 30.

<sup>188</sup> Daniel J. Benjamin et al., "The Genetic Architecture of Economic and Political Preferences," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 21 (2012).

heritability of political ideology seems to be a very distant goal from the perspective of today's science.

Twin studies in particular require careful, conservative interpretation. For instance, one twin study found that empathy was about 30% heritable (an estimate roughly in line with prior studies).<sup>189</sup> Yet a meta-analysis of studies measuring levels of empathy in U.S. college students from 1979 to 2009 found that empathy had decreased by 34-48% in that time.<sup>190</sup> Could 30% of this drop be explained by genes – did empathic people stop having as many children during these thirty years? Such an interpretation is highly unlikely to be true.

The very precise-seeming heritability estimates produced by twin studies need to be taken with a grain of salt. First, heritability itself is a confusing term: it seems like it is a property of the trait itself, when it is actually just a description of the population in which the trait appears.<sup>191</sup> "Political ideology is 40% heritable" may seem like it means that 40% of one's ideology is passed on to one's children, or that there is a 40% chance that a child will develop the ideology of its parent, when what it really means is that within the population studied, 40% of the variance between the ideology of parents and their children was heritable. Also, a high degree of heritability *within* a group says nothing about variation *between* groups. Most of the variation in political attitudes among Trinidadians may be genetic, but that does not mean that their political attitudes are (mostly) genetically transmitted. It means that Trinidadians exhibit genetic variation that affects political

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<sup>189</sup> Mark H. Davis et al., "The Heritability of Characteristics Associated with Dispositional Empathy," *Journal of Personality* 62, no. 3 (1994): 380.

<sup>190</sup> Sara H. Konrath et al., "Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2010): 186.

<sup>191</sup> Marks, *What It Means*, 146.

attitudes, and these effects are larger than the effects of environmental and cultural differences in Trinidad. This tells us little about Jamaicans, or any other group.<sup>192</sup> In addition, heritability estimates are known to be strongly affected by different environmental conditions alone.<sup>193</sup>

Apportioning variance in political ideology to *either* genetic *or* environmental factors is problematic from the start.<sup>194</sup> The conceptual opposition between nature and nurture first arose in Anglo-American culture in the 1800s, and has influenced science ever since – but if “nature versus nurture” *ever* made sense, it most certainly does not today in light of modern genetics.<sup>195</sup> More specifically, twin studies can only offer trustworthy, precise estimates of genetic and environmental contributions to a trait when *all* causal factors have been clearly demarcated, and when all causal factors act *independently* of each other.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> The fundamental logic here is pretty intuitive. For instance, few would expect that if thousands of children in the U.S. were adopted by North Korean families they would grow up to be Democrats or Republicans, just as no one would expect North Korean children adopted and raised by families in the U.S. to grow up with an unwavering allegiance to the Dear Leader.

<sup>193</sup> Jon Beckwith and Corey A. Morris, "Twin Studies of Political Behavior: Untenable Assumptions?" *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 04 (2008): 785-786; Shultziner, "Genes and Politics," 354.

<sup>194</sup> Especially when all of the focus is on purported genetic factors:

The genetic essentialist biases contribute to an increase in the likelihood that specific outcomes/phenotypes will be viewed more deterministically while alternative etiological explanations will be devalued. Demonstrating some of the effects of these biases, empirical research showed that exposure to genetic etiological accounts affects a slew of outcomes ranging from dislike of ethnically dissimilar individuals and increased gender stereotyping to altered moral evaluations, academic underperformance, and adverse health behavior intentions. These findings demonstrate that laypeople's perceptions of genetic etiology for various human phenotypes are not only incongruent with the current scientific picture of genotype-phenotype relationships, but they may also facilitate undesirable beliefs and suboptimal behaviors. (Dar-Nimrod, 2012, 362, references removed)

<sup>195</sup> For an excellent overview, see Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space Between Nature and Nurture* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Modern genetics seems to have outgrown this debate: "Inherited versus environmental," or "nature versus nurture," are artificial and superannuated dichotomies that distort the complexity of the phenomena. Trying to fit environmentally induced epigenetic activation of retrotransposons, or intergenerationally transmitted epigenetic reprogramming, into this dichotomous worldview as represented in standard quantitative genetic models is like trying to locate black holes within Aristotle's dichotomy of the sublunar world of change and the immutable heavens. (Charney, 2012, 56-57)

<sup>196</sup> Keller, *Mirage of a Space*, 39.

However, everything we know about biology tells us that it is complex, non-linear, and nonadditive – making truly *independent* causal factors highly unlikely.<sup>197</sup>

Twin studies also rely upon a key assumption: that the environments experienced by identical twins are no different on average from the environments experienced by fraternal twins. This is how an estimate of heredity can be plucked out of data about similarities between identical and fraternal twins: if the identical twins are more alike than fraternal twins, it would seem that this extra similarity must be genetic, *if* there is nothing about identical twins' environments that is more similar than those of fraternal twins. (Greater similarities between identical versus fraternal twins must come from their more-similar genes if the environments are essentially the same.) Estimates of heritability rely on this assumption, and they are inflated to the extent that the environment shared by identical twins is actually more similar than the environment shared by fraternal twins. This would occur, for instance, if family members, teachers, and friends tended to treat identical twins more similarly than fraternal twins. Studies of twins have found precisely that.<sup>198</sup> This may be the source of the “mystery of missing heritability” arising from high estimates of heritability from twin studies on the one hand, and studies of the genome itself which have turned up relatively few genes associated with various traits, and which explain only a fraction of the estimated heritability. Twin studies may likely produce inflated

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<sup>197</sup> Shultziner, “Genes and Politics,” 357.

<sup>198</sup> Beckwith and Morris, “Twin Studies,” 787; Allan V. Horwitz et al., “Double Vision: Reply to Freese and Powell,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2003); Jay Joseph, “The Genetics of Political Attitudes and Behavior: Claims and Refutations,” *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry* 12, no. 3 (2010): 205-206. However, see Levente Littvay, “Do Heritability Estimates of Political Phenotypes Suffer from an Equal Environment Assumption Violation? Evidence from an Empirical Study,” *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 15, no. 01 (2012).

estimates for heredity by confounding purely genetic effects with gene-culture, gene-environment, and a host of potential epigenetic interactions.<sup>199</sup>

Twin studies are useful for determining *whether* there are genetic effects on a particular trait, but less useful for determining *how much*.<sup>200</sup> They are valuable for clearly demonstrating that some characteristics we would likely have assumed to be entirely environmentally-determined – like political views – are in fact influenced by genes. At the same time, critiques of genome-wide association and gene-behavior linkage studies are correct in urging caution. The tools we have available can only make slow, step-by-step progress in understanding *how* genes and environment interact to produce our political dispositions.<sup>201</sup> A great deal of future research is needed to tease apart the various contributors to ideological development.<sup>202</sup>

## **xi. What we know about our evolved political psychology**

While we may be decades away from anything approaching a complete understanding of how genes interacting with our environment produce political dispositions, we can at least sketch an interesting outline. Genetic evolution has produced minds with varying emotional tendencies, propensities, states, reactions, styles of thought, and other traits that have the result of pulling us in the direction of one or another of the

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<sup>199</sup> Jordana T. Bell and Tim D. Spector, "A Twin Approach to Unraveling Epigenetics," *Trends in Genetics* 27, no. 3 (2011); Evan Charney, "Behavior Genetics and Postgenomics," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35, no. 05 (2012): 26; Or Zuk et al., "The Mystery of Missing Heritability: Genetic Interactions Create Phantom Heritability," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>200</sup> Wim E. Crusio, "Heritability Estimates in Behavior Genetics: Wasn't That Station Passed Long Ago?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35, no. 05 (2012): 362.

<sup>201</sup> James H. Fowler and Christopher T. Dawes, "In Defense of Genopolitics," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 02 (2013).

<sup>202</sup> See, for instance, Peter Beattie, "The 'Chicken-and-Egg' Development of Political Opinions – the Roles of Genes, Social Status, Ideology, and Information," preprint (submitted April 28, 2016).

political positions and ideologies we are exposed to. (These political positions and ideologies were, in turn, created by cultural evolution – and the two are engaged in a gene-culture co-evolutionary dance.) Even though we do not know exactly how individual genes function to produce this result, the result is clear enough. It is written into our brains.

There are not too many people who would guess that the way our brains react to seeing disgusting pictures can predict our political ideology. Yet that is exactly what a study found using fMRI scans of participants' brains as they viewed an assortment of images: brain activity while viewing disgusting images reliably predicted whether participants aligned with the political Left or Right.<sup>203</sup> In another study, brain scans of people making judgments of risk were found to be better predictors of political ideology (82.9% accurate) than knowing the political party a person's mother and father identifies with (69.5% accurate).<sup>204</sup> Even the size of certain brain structures can be used to predict political orientation: those with greater volume of gray matter in the ACC (which processes conflicts between different parts of the brain) tend toward the Left, while those with greater volume of gray matter in the right amygdala (which processes fear) and the left insula (which processes disgust) tend toward the Right.<sup>205</sup>

This is one of the fundamental neurological differences between people who identify with the Right versus the Left: a greater sensitivity to disgust and fear. While leftists seem to be better at detecting (and then overriding) conflicts between their intentions and their

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<sup>203</sup> Woo-Young Ahn et al., "Nonpolitical Images Evoke Neural Predictors of Political Ideology," *Current Biology* 24, no. 22 (2014).

<sup>204</sup> Darren Schreiber et al., "Red Brain, Blue Brain: Evaluative Processes Differ in Democrats and Republicans," *PloS one* 8, no. 2 (2013): e52970.

<sup>205</sup> John T. Jost and David M. Amodio, "Political Ideology as Motivated Social Cognition: Behavioral and Neuroscientific Evidence," *Motivation and Emotion* 36, no. 1 (2012): 61; John T. Jost et al., "Political Neuroscience: the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship," *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014): 22-23; Ryota Kanai et al., "Political Orientations Are Correlated with Brain Structure in Young Adults," *Current Biology* 21, no. 8 (2011).



automatic responses, rightists seem to be constitutionally more vigilant than leftists at detecting possible threats in the environment.<sup>206</sup> In studies across several countries and using different research methods, rightists display greater attention to and fixation on negative, disturbing, and disgusting images than leftists.<sup>207</sup> In addition to reactions to images, rightists reliably display a greater sensitivity to negativity of all sorts in a broad variety of environments.<sup>208</sup> Leftists, on the other hand, exhibit stronger connections in the “human mirror-neuron system,” which simulates the feelings of others and is linked to social and emotional cognition, including empathy.<sup>209</sup> In general, leftists seem more attuned to “appetitive,” or positive features of the environment, while rightists are more responsible to “aversive,” negative stimuli.<sup>210</sup>

Even between the age of five and seven, children of rightwing versus leftwing parents display fundamental neurological differences, with children of rightwing parents displaying greater neurological sensitivity to angry, threatening faces.<sup>211</sup> Children of parents with authoritarian parenting attitudes are more likely to be rightwing by age 18, while the children of parents using more sensitive caregiving styles were closer to the Left

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<sup>206</sup> Douglas R. Oxley et al., "Political Attitudes Vary with Physiological Traits," *Science* 321, no. 5896 (2008).

<sup>207</sup> John R. Hibbing et al., "Differences in Negativity Bias Underlie Variations in Political Ideology," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 03 (2014): 301.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Jost et al., "Political Neuroscience," 24; Roger Newman-Norlund et al., "Human Mirror Neuron System (hMNS) Specific Differences in Resting-State Functional Connectivity in Self-Reported Democrats and Republicans: A Pilot Study," *Journal of Behavioral and Brain Science* 3, no. 4 (2013). Stress has been found to be a key determinant of whether empathy is expressed, in both humans and mice (Martin et al., 2015). Strangers elicit stress, muting the expression of empathy present in reactions to well-known individuals. Such differences in empathy between leftists and rightists could, therefore, potentially be due to the greater stress of fear experienced by rightists.

<sup>210</sup> Michael D. Dodd et al., "The Political Left Rolls with the Good and the Political Right Confronts the Bad: Connecting Physiology and Cognition to Preferences," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 367, no. 1589 (2012).

<sup>211</sup> Jost et al., "Political Neuroscience," 19-20.

by age 18.<sup>212</sup> By the first year of primary school, children already exhibit structured and consistent political orientations.<sup>213</sup> In one fascinating study, the personalities of preschool children were analyzed, and then were reexamined 20 years later.<sup>214</sup> A comparison of the same individuals at preschool age versus adulthood revealed a number of stark contrasts. Children that would later grow into conservative adults were described during preschool as fearful, rigid, vulnerable, inhibited, easily offended, and relatively over-controlled; children that would later grow into liberal adults were described during preschool as resilient, self-reliant, energetic, somewhat dominating, developing close relationships, and relatively under-controlled.<sup>215</sup>

Outside of brain scanners, neurological differences between leftists and rightists appear in so-called “implicit association tasks,” where automatic reactions too fast to involve conscious deliberation are measured. Rightists display greater automatic

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<sup>212</sup> R. Chris Fraley et al., "Developmental Antecedents of Political Ideology a Longitudinal Investigation from Birth to Age 18 Years," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 11 (2012): 1427.

<sup>213</sup> Jan W. van Deth et al., "Children and Politics: An Empirical Reassessment of Early Political Socialization," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>214</sup> Jack Block and Jeanne H. Block, "Nursery School Personality and Political Orientation Two Decades Later," *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 5 (2006).

<sup>215</sup> The researchers' conclusions are worth reading in greater detail:

Why will the psychological characteristics of over-controllers often influence them to gravitate toward the politically conservative? As suggested here by our findings and earlier intimated in previous political writings, timorous conservatives of either gender tend to be easily rattled by uncertainty (and always there can be the *feeling* of uncertainty) and therefore will feel more comfortable and safer with already structured and predictable—therefore traditional—environments; they will tend to be resistant to change toward what might be self-threatening and forsaking of established modes of behavior; they will be attracted by and will tend to support decisive (if self-appointed) leaders who are presumed to have special and security-enhancing knowledge.

Conversely, why will under-controllers of either gender tend toward the more politically liberal? Given their personal proclivities toward uncommon perspectives of possibility, an appetite for novelty, and their easier expression of impulse, they will often encounter in the everyday world constraints and frustrations that do not appear to be sensibly or societally required. As a first line of adaptive reaction, they will wish these constraints removed or the world rearranged to be less frustrating. Various justifications, not necessarily narrowly self-serving, will be confidently brought forward in support of alternative political principles oriented toward achieving a better life for all. Ironically, the sheer variety of changes and improvements suggested by the liberal-minded under-controller may explain the diffuseness, and subsequent ineffectiveness, of liberals in politics where a collective single-mindedness of purpose so often is required. (Block and Block, 2006, 746)

preferences for order over chaos and conformity over rebelliousness than leftists, while leftists show greater automatic preferences for flexibility over stability and progress over tradition.<sup>216</sup> Research has even found that people can judge politicians' political ideology – with better-than-chance accuracy – simply by viewing their photographs.<sup>217</sup> Political differences are both skin deep and more than skin deep.

We are only at the beginning stages of understanding how our brains work, and so it is a reasonable assumption that thinking about politics works in much the same way as thinking about history, or chess, or art. Why should politics be different from any other topic we can think about? However, neuroimaging research has revealed that thinking about politics is fundamentally different from other topics: it taps into parts of our brain that evolved to facilitate social cognition, which involves coalitions, hierarchies, cooperation, alliances, and so on. Only people who are unknowledgeable about politics use the same parts of their brains to think about politics as they would any other technical subject, like plumbing or science.<sup>218</sup> The brains of those who have knowledge of politics, however, use cerebral structures that evolved to facilitate social intelligence.<sup>219</sup> If political cognition is simply the newest form of social cognition that has evolved over millions of years, then neurological results like these start to make sense. We do not have genes “for” conservatism versus liberalism (in the U.S.), or communism versus capitalist democracy (in China), or social democracy versus neoliberalism (in Europe), etc.; we have

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<sup>216</sup> John T. Jost et al., "Ideology: Its Resurgence in Social, Personality, and Political Psychology," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 2 (2008): 128-129.

<sup>217</sup> Jakub Samochowiec et al., "Political Ideology at Face Value," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>218</sup> Funk, "Genetic Foundations," 244.

<sup>219</sup> James H. Fowler and Darren Schreiber, "Biology, Politics, and the Emerging Science of Human Nature," *Science* 322, no. 5903 (2008).

genes that tend to produce different basic psychological dispositions in social cognition that express themselves by making us more likely to adopt one or another political ideology present in our information ecology. These basic psychological dispositions are merely gut reactions: unthinking tendencies to respond a certain way to different ideas and situations. Most likely, these gut reactions evolved alongside our sense of morality, the key psychological adaptation that allowed us to navigate through life in highly cooperative societies. Of course, for the majority of our evolutionary history they have been tuned to respond to situations involving small numbers of individuals, so that today we form opinions (Stirner's "spooks") on political issues involving millions using psychological adaptations designed for far smaller groups. So it is that political elites can manipulate our judgments of policies on crime and immigration using individual stereotypes of inveterate criminals and dangerous foreigners.<sup>220</sup>

What seems to happen is that these basic psychological dispositions pull one in a Left or Right direction, making some political ideas appear more attractive, or feel more right, than others. Just as some chemical compounds mix together while others repel each other (like water and oil), we display "elective affinities" toward some ideas and aversion to others.<sup>221</sup> After a significant amount of political ideas have been learned, our brains start displaying signs of pleasure or reward when we are exposed to other ideas that fit with our Left or Right disposition and background knowledge. This can produce a physiological

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<sup>220</sup> Michael Bang Petersen "Public Opinion and Evolved Heuristics: The Role of Category-Based Inference," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 9, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>221</sup> John T. Jost et al., "Political ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009).

feedback loop, causing our initial political disposition to snowball into an ever stronger, tightly-organized, and knowledgeable ideological stance.<sup>222</sup>

The basic psychological dispositions that lead toward the adoption of one or another political ideology seem to be the same that produce differences in personality.<sup>223</sup> The strongest associations are between “openness to new experiences” and leftwing orientation, and between “conscientiousness” and “need for order” and rightwing orientation.<sup>224</sup> (More recent work has cast doubt on this link,<sup>225</sup> which may be better explained by needs for cognition and cognitive closure influencing ideology.)<sup>226</sup> Experiments in Italy and the Netherlands found that leftists tend to be more pro-social or other-oriented, while rightists tend to be more individualistic and competitive.<sup>227</sup> Studies of liberals and conservatives in the U.S. found that liberals tended to be more novelty-seeking, open-minded, curious, and creative, while conservatives were more organized, conventional, and orderly. These characteristics were consistently found using self-reported personality assessments, observed behavior in social interactions, and even personal possessions and the organization of living and working spaces.<sup>228</sup> (For instance, conservatives’ bedrooms were neater, cleaner, and included more organizational items like

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<sup>222</sup> Jost et al., “Political Neuroscience,” 14.

<sup>223</sup> Brad Verhulst et al., “Correlation not Causation: The Relationship between Personality Traits and Political Ideologies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 1 (2012): 47-48.

<sup>224</sup> Jost et al., “Political Neuroscience,” 18.

<sup>225</sup> Peter K. Hatemi and Brad Verhulst, “Political Attitudes Develop Independently of Personality Traits,” *PLoS one* 10, no. 3 (2015).

<sup>226</sup> Aleksander Ksiazkiewicz et al., “The Role of Cognitive Style in the Link Between Genes and Political Ideology,” *Political Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>227</sup> Paul A.M. Van Lange et al., “Are Conservatives Less Likely to Be Prosocial than Liberals? From Games to Ideology, Political Preferences and Voting,” *European Journal of Personality* 26, no. 5 (2012).

<sup>228</sup> Dana R. Carney et al., “The Secret Lives of Liberals and Conservatives: Personality Profiles, Interaction Styles, and the Things They Leave Behind,” *Political Psychology* 29, no. 6 (2008).

calendars, while liberals' bedrooms included more cultural memorabilia, and books and music of greater variety.)

In meta-analyses of dozens of studies, leftwing orientation was found to correlate moderately with cognitive ability, tolerance of ambiguity, and integrative complexity.<sup>229</sup> Independent of level of education, those on the Left tend to demonstrate greater intelligence. Individuals with lower intelligence are more likely to endorse rightwing ideologies and harbor prejudice against minorities, independent of the effects of education and socioeconomic status.<sup>230</sup> Rightwingers report greater certainty and stability in their opinions, exhibit more consistency between implicit and explicit attitudes, score higher on intuitive thinking and self-deception, and tend to process information heuristically rather than systematically; in general, rightwingers are less epistemologically rigorous than leftwingers.<sup>231</sup> Related scientific results include relationships such as low-effort thinking promoting political conservatism, abstract thinking reducing conservative prejudices, and lower creativity and stronger illusory correlations among conservatives<sup>232</sup> (although these relationships may pertain only to social conservatives as opposed to economic conservatives).<sup>233</sup> These results may be partially explained by rightwingers' greater

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<sup>229</sup> Emma Onraet et al., "The Association of Cognitive Ability with Right-wing Ideological Attitudes and Prejudice: A Meta-analytic Review," *European Journal of Personality* 29, no. 6 (2015); Alain Van Hiel et al., "The Relationship Between Social-Cultural Attitudes and Behavioral Measures of Cognitive Style: A Meta-Analytic Integration of Studies," *Journal of Personality* 78, no. 6 (2010): 1790-1791.

<sup>230</sup> Gordon Hodson and Michael A. Busseri. "Bright Minds and Dark Attitudes Lower Cognitive Ability Predicts Greater Prejudice Through Right-Wing Ideology and Low Intergroup Contact," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 2 (2012): 192.

<sup>231</sup> John T. Jost and Margarita Krochik, "Ideological Differences in Epistemic Motivation: Implications for Attitude Structure, Depth of Information Processing, Susceptibility to Persuasion, and Stereotyping," in *Advances in Motivation Science*, ed. Andrew Elliot, 181-231 (San Diego: Elsevier, 2014); Andrea L. Miller et al., "Political Ideology and Persuasion: Systematic and Heuristic Processing among Liberals and Conservatives," *The Yale Review Of Undergraduate Research in Psychology* (2010).

<sup>232</sup> Hodson, Gordon. "Is It Impolite to Discuss Cognitive Differences between Liberals and Conservatives?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 03 (2014): 313.

<sup>233</sup> John R. Hibbing et al., "Negativity Bias and Political Preferences: A Response to Commentators," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014): 339-341; Steven G. Ludeke and Colin G. DeYoung, "Differences

persistence in hewing to habit and lower levels of cognitive control and self-regulation.<sup>234</sup> In fact, in experiments involving attribution-making (deciding whether someone's actions were due to the person's intrinsic nature, or whether situational and environmental factors should be taken into account), leftwingers can be made to reason like rightwingers by imposing time constraints or distractions, suggesting that the cognitive style of the Right is fundamentally simpler.<sup>235</sup> These sorts of differences in cognitive ability begin to appear very early in development, with children having greater difficulty attending to tasks at 54 months being more likely to align with the Right by age 18.<sup>236</sup>

Although many if not most of the studies in this area have focused on political dispositions in the U.S. and Europe, those that have looked at a broader variety of countries have found that the same Left-Right political dichotomy operates in countries in East Asia as well as in ex-communist Eastern Europe.<sup>237</sup> However, in countries that recently underwent a major political shift like that of the ex-communist Eastern European countries, the *content* of the Left-Right divide is much less clear.<sup>238</sup>

We can tell that our universal, evolved psychology includes dispositions that tend to lead us to support tradition and inequality or change and equality. We do not know, however, exactly how our political orientations form. Even if the estimates from twin

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in Negativity Bias Probably Underlie Variation in Attitudes toward Change Generally, not Political Ideology Specifically," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014): 320; Ariel Malka and Christopher J. Soto, "How Encompassing Is the Effect of Negativity Bias on Political Conservatism?" *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>234</sup> David M. Amodio et al., "Neurocognitive Correlates of Liberalism and Conservatism," *Nature Neuroscience* 10, no. 10 (2007).

<sup>235</sup> Linda J. Skitka et al., "Dispositions, Scripts, or Motivated Correction? Understanding Ideological Differences in Explanations for Social Problems," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 2 (2002): 484.

<sup>236</sup> Fraley et al., "Developmental Antecedents," 1429.

<sup>237</sup> Willy Jou, "The Heuristic Value of the Left—Right Schema in East Asia." *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>238</sup> Yuval Piurko et al., "Basic Personal Values and the Meaning of Left-Right Political Orientations in 20 Countries," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 4 (2011).

studies were perfectly accurate, we would be left with a roughly 50/50 gene/environment explanation. A more detailed picture can be painted, however. Genes and environment produce the biology of our minds, including the basic components of political orientation. During development, our minds form cognitive, emotional, and information-processing biases consistent with political orientation; these, along with our early social environments, affect the development of our personality and values, which go on to influence our selection of a political ideology from those available in our environment.<sup>239</sup> In some cases, the ideological packages prevalent in our environment will comfortably fit with our genetic predispositions, and in other cases they will conflict.<sup>240</sup> Genetic and environmental influences may pull in subtly different or entirely opposite directions, producing a kaleidoscopic pattern of ideological components.<sup>241</sup> Of course, each of these factors exerts mutual influence on each other during one's lifetime.<sup>242</sup> One may have a genetic predisposition to rightwing ideas, but losing one's job or experiencing serious financial problems may incline one to adopt leftwing views on economic policy.<sup>243</sup>

Some ideas or pieces of information are more "sticky" than others, depending on the political orientation our genes and environments jointly produce. Other ideas are more likely to be adopted simply because they fit with other ideas in the political discourse we

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<sup>239</sup> Beattie, "The 'Chicken-and-Egg'"; Kevin B. Smith et al., "Linking Genetics and Political Attitudes: Reconceptualizing Political Ideology," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>240</sup> Brad Verhulst et al., "Disentangling the Importance of Psychological Predispositions and Social Constructions in the Organization of American Political Ideology," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>241</sup> Peter K. Hatemi et al., "It's the End of Ideology as We Know It." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 24, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>242</sup> Zoltán Fazekas and Levente Littvay, "The Importance of Context in the Genetic Transmission of U.S. Party Identification," *Political Psychology* 36, no. 4 (2015); Christian Kandler et al., "Life Events as Environmental States and Genetic Traits and the Role of Personality: A Longitudinal Twin Study," *Behavior Genetics* 42, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>243</sup> Hatemi, Peter K. "The Influence of Major Life Events on Economic Attitudes in a World of Gene-Environment Interplay." *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013).



are exposed to through the media.<sup>244</sup> For instance, we may strongly believe that abortion is evil – owing to our orientation to traditionalism and the arguments against abortion we have heard – and have no strong opinions on free trade agreements. But if the political discourse we hear consistently packages opposition to abortion with support for free trade agreements, we may also develop support for free trade. As another example, Christians in the U.S. would by virtue of their faith tend to be opposed to the use of torture.<sup>245</sup> Many of those who are religious likely have a preference for tradition, and many religious people in the U.S. also align with the political Right. A study of religious people in the U.S. during the “War on Terror” found that those who were politically knowledgeable – who knew that the U.S. Right was supportive of torture against suspected terrorists – were more likely to support torture than religious people who were not so politically engaged.<sup>246</sup> Hence, gene-culture coevolution produces a variety of conflicting forces: biological predispositions, environmental influences on development, and the political ideologies and their informational content prevalent in various cultures at different times. Certainly Christians during early Roman times would have been uniformly against torture; but under the influence of packaged political ideas corresponding to U.S. conservatism in 2004-2006, many politically-engaged Christians came to adopt an opinion at variance with long-standing interpretations of their religion.

Political attitudes tend to come in interconnected packages; one does not usually support pacifism and greater military spending, or higher taxes on the rich along with

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<sup>244</sup> Brad Verhulst et al., "Disentangling," 388-389.

<sup>245</sup> In Matthew 25:34-35, Jesus describes the welcome God will address to those deserving of heaven – who are placed on his *right* – which details the good deeds they did, including the following: “I was in prison, and you visited me.” Not “I was in prison, and you tortured me.”

<sup>246</sup> Ariel Malka and Christopher J. Soto, "The Conflicting Influences of Religiosity on Attitude toward Torture," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2011): 8.

reducing social spending.<sup>247</sup> This is because our brains detect internal conflicts and attempt to eliminate them. However, if we do not have much knowledge about politics, we are less capable of eliminating conflicts because we are blind to their existence in the first place.<sup>248</sup> The political environment is thus doubly important. For one reason, if we are highly attuned to it, we are more likely to adopt entire issue packages from the Left or Right without any conflicting opinions. The other reason is that the political environment we find ourselves in offers limited choices with which to match our evolved dispositions for tradition/change or equality/inequality.

For instance, in Western Europe, with its history of a capitalist socioeconomic structure, acceptance of inequality correlates strongly with rightwing political orientation. However, in Eastern Europe, with its recent history of socialism, there is no such correlation.<sup>249</sup> This could be due to the fact that during the recent history of Eastern Europe, a desire for tradition over change would have meant preferring the relatively equal distribution of wealth characteristic of socialism. In Scandinavian countries, with a recent history of egalitarian economic and social policies, those on the “psychological” Left who are predisposed toward social change (and higher in cognitive ability) tend to support more *laissez faire* policies and reduced income redistribution – policies that in other countries with less egalitarian economic systems would tend to be supported by those on

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<sup>247</sup> This is common sense, but it has also been demonstrated from a schema theory perspective (Conover and Feldman, 1984). Collections of memes, encoded as schemas in the human mind, affect the sort of political ideology that can possibly emerge in that mind. Without the informational chunks comprising an ideology (for instance, “free markets produce greater wealth,” “welfare causes laziness,” etc., for conservatism), it is impossible to hold it; just as it is impossible to practice medicine without having absorbed countless memes about the human body and disease.

<sup>248</sup> Matthew D. Lieberman et al., “Is Political Cognition Like Riding a Bicycle? How Cognitive Neuroscience Can Inform Research on Political Thinking,” *Political Psychology* 24, no. 4 (2003): 690-692.

<sup>249</sup> Hulda Thorisdottir et al., “Psychological Needs and Values Underlying Left-Right Political Orientation: Cross-National Evidence from Eastern and Western Europe,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2007): 198.

the psychological Right.<sup>250</sup> Likewise, in China, with a recent history of egalitarian policies, those on the psychological Left adhere to some opinions that would be considered rightwing in Europe (*laissez faire*), while those on the psychological Right adhere to opinions that would be considered leftwing elsewhere (socialist economics).<sup>251</sup> Hence while the psychological Left and Right may be a universal feature of human psychology, the actual informational content of leftist and rightist beliefs will vary widely depending on local context. (That the content of the *psychological* Left and Right maps neatly on to the *political* content of the Left and Right in the United States is merely an accident produced by the U.S. residence of so many researchers in this area.)

While the results of genetic and neuroscientific research strongly suggest that there is a hard-wired, heritable component to political orientation in our genes that expresses itself in the very structure of our brains, there is also evidence that that our environments too can reshape our brains' structure.<sup>252</sup> For instance, while leftwing and rightwing people display differences in the sizes and activity levels of certain brain structures, evidence suggests that involvement with partisan politics may help drive those differences irrespective of heredity. Changes in cognitive functions of other types are also known to lead to changes in brain structure, as when people studying a map of London for a taxi driver examination demonstrated significant growth in the brain region relating to memory formation.<sup>253</sup> Therefore, while genetic influences certainly shape our brains in

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<sup>250</sup> Sven Oskarsson et al., "Linking Genes and Political Orientations: Testing the Cognitive Ability as Mediator Hypothesis," *Political Psychology* 36, no. 6 (2015).

<sup>251</sup> Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, "China's Ideological Spectrum," MIT Political Science Department Research Paper No. 2015-6 (2015).

<sup>252</sup> John T. Jost et al., "The 'Chicken-and-Egg' Problem in Political Neuroscience," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014); Jost et al., "Political Neuroscience," 29-30.

<sup>253</sup> Schreiber et al., "Red Brain," e52970-e52971.

ways that make some ideologies more attractive, so too can our ideologies shape our psychological and physiological characteristics. People choose ideas, and ideas choose people.<sup>254</sup>

Environmental influences also help to shape personality traits and shift political orientations. For instance, low socioeconomic status – which typically involves working in low-status jobs with little autonomy – is a reliable predictor of obedience to authority, which correlates with rightwing political orientation.<sup>255</sup> Genes may also influence media preferences, which in turn affect the development of ideology.<sup>256</sup> Threatening events like the 9/11 attacks, by activating fear of death and threats to the system, subtly influence people to shift their political opinions rightward.<sup>257</sup> Even writing an autobiography has been shown to temporarily increase political conservatism, by focusing on how the status quo was arrived at by a series of free choices (and hence must be just).<sup>258</sup> Studies of experienced academics and Supreme Court nominees suggest that working in an occupation requiring the understanding and appreciation of multiple, conflicting arguments and evidence increases the likelihood of a leftward shift in opinions.<sup>259</sup> A study of voting records and economic performance in the U.S. over nearly a century found that a

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<sup>254</sup> Jost et al., "Political Neuroscience," 29.

<sup>255</sup> Jaime L. Napier and John T. Jost, "The 'Antidemocratic Personality' Revisited: A Cross-National Investigation of Working-Class Authoritarianism," *Journal of Social Issues* 64, no. 3 (2008): 607. High-demand (time pressure, mental load, and coordination responsibilities) and low-control (decision authority and skill discretion) jobs have also been found to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease (Huang et al., 2015).

<sup>256</sup> Xiaowen Xu and Jordan B. Peterson, "Differences in Media Preference Mediate the Link Between Personality and Political Orientation," *Political Psychology* 38, vol. 1 (2015).

<sup>257</sup> Jost et al., "Structure, Functions," 321.

<sup>258</sup> Joris Lammers and Travis Proulx, "Writing Autobiographical Narratives Increases Political Conservatism," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 4 (2013).

<sup>259</sup> Jost et al., "Ideology: Its Resurgence," 133-134; Idan S. Solon, "Scholarly Elites Orient Left, Irrespective of Academic Affiliation." *Intelligence* 51 (2015).

threatening economic environment influences voting toward the Right, while a positive economic environment influences voting towards the Left.<sup>260</sup>

## **xii. Left and Right in evolutionary psychology**

In its most basic, cross-cultural, *psychological*<sup>261</sup> form, the differences between Left and Right concern social change versus tradition, and rejecting versus accepting inequality and hierarchy.<sup>262</sup> Dozens of studies and experiments across several countries have found that leftists reliably prefer social change and reject inequality, while rightists prefer tradition and are accepting of inequality.<sup>263</sup> This dichotomy can be traced as far back as early Christian symbolism, with the Right associated with acceptance of social and religious hierarchies and the Left associated with equalizing conditions by challenging God and the monarchy.<sup>264</sup>

The tendency toward traditionalism may share a common genetic factor that disposes people toward rightwing authoritarianism, religiosity, and conservatism.<sup>265</sup> This cluster of traits pulls people toward supporting the status quo, or ways of life from the past. The evolutionary adaptiveness of traditionalism is clear: “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” As with everything genetic, however, environmental factors are powerful influences: for those

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<sup>260</sup> De Neve, Jan-Emmanuel, "Ideological Change and the Economics of Voting Behavior in the US, 1920–2008," *Electoral Studies* 34 (2014).

<sup>261</sup> Again, the *psychological* Left and Right differ from the *political* Left and Right in some national contexts. The *political* Right in China, for instance, which wants a reduced state and a more open economy, would be on the *psychological* Left; while the *political* Left in China, which wants expanded state intervention in the economy, would be on the *psychological* Right, owing to Chinese history and the 1949 victory of its *political* Left.

<sup>262</sup> John T. Jost et al., "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition," *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>263</sup> Jost et al., "Structure, Functions," 310-312.

<sup>264</sup> Jost and Amodio, "Political Ideology," 56.

<sup>265</sup> Steven Ludeke et al., "'Obedience to Traditional Authority:' A Heritable Factor Underlying Authoritarianism, Conservatism and Religiousness," *Personality and Individual Differences* 55, no. 4 (2013): 378.

in communist or postcommunist countries, traditionalism can instead incline people to protect the old communist social order, with its high levels of equality and hostility to religion.<sup>266</sup> The tendency toward preferring change, on the other hand, may be related to a gene associated with novelty-seeking behavior. Its evolutionary adaptiveness was revealed in a study of early human migrations from Africa, which found an association between migratory distance and the prevalence of the “novelty-seeking” gene.<sup>267</sup> Clearly, it pays to have some people who are willing to give up the tried and true to explore new possibilities. Additionally, change versus tradition may be related to, of all things, optimal breeding. Since populations that reproduce with fairly-closely related individuals tend to have higher birthrates, this could have created a selection pressure for avoiding novelty in general, which also happened to affect mate selection. Contrariwise, populations that reproduce with distant, unrelated individuals may have lower birthrates but they enjoy lower rates of infant mortality and genetic illnesses, and this could have created a selection pressure *for* a sense of novelty.<sup>268</sup> Supporting this theory are findings on mating preferences that show U.S. liberals are more likely than conservatives to seek partners with different body types and of different ethnicities.<sup>269</sup>

The tendency toward hierarchy and authority most likely has a very old history, as it is present in far stronger form in our closest animal relative, chimpanzees. Hierarchal primate species may even share a gene with us, one that is found in greater prevalence

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<sup>266</sup> Piurko et al., “Basic Personal,” 542; Thorisdottir et al., “Psychological Needs,” 198.

<sup>267</sup> Luke J. Matthews and Paul M. Butler, “Novelty-Seeking DRD4 Polymorphisms Are Associated with Human Migration Distance Out-of-Africa after Controlling for Neutral Population Gene Structure,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 145, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>268</sup> Avi Tuschman, *Our Political Nature: The Evolutionary Origins of What Divides Us* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2013): 146.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

among human cultures with higher levels of inequality.<sup>270</sup> This tendency toward approving of hierarchy and inequality is perhaps less obviously adaptive. However, stark gender inequality has the side effect of increasing birth rates, as women excluded from economic self-sufficiency and control over their own lives tend to have more children.<sup>271</sup> This may have provided a source of evolutionary adaptiveness. The tendency to support equality, on the other hand, may be caused by a greater capacity for empathy, allowing us to put ourselves in the shoes of those at the bottom of a hierarchy.<sup>272</sup> Its adaptiveness is readily apparent from a look at how our aggressive egalitarian social structure allowed us to settle the whole planet.

These two components, social change versus tradition and acceptance versus rejection of inequality, can cover different issue areas: change or tradition dealing with social issues and acceptance or rejection of inequality covering economic issues. While many people's overall political views can be discordant across these two dimensions (preferring tradition in social issues but equality in economic issues, or change in social issues but accepting inequality in the realm of economic policy), in most countries the two components are highly correlated.<sup>273</sup> This may be an environmental effect, with those who are exposed to politics through the media being more likely to adopt a consistent package of either leftwing or rightwing social and economic attitudes prevalent in the media environment.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Chiao, "Neural Basis," 807.

<sup>271</sup> Tuschman, *Our Political Nature*, 199-209.

<sup>272</sup> Chiao, "Neural Basis," 806.

<sup>273</sup> Jost et al., "Structure, Functions," 313.

<sup>274</sup> Ariel Malka and Christopher J. Soto, "Rigidity of the Economic Right? Menu-Independent and Menu-Dependent Influences of Psychological Dispositions on Political Attitudes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 2 (2015).

The rightwing preference for tradition and acceptance of inequality is produced by a combination of fundamental psychological needs and drives: anxiety about death, worries about system instability, dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity, needs for structure, closure, and order, fear of loss and threats, and lower levels of empathy. The leftwing preference for social change and equality is produced by openness to experience, tolerance of uncertainty, a more complex style of thinking, and higher levels of empathy. These conclusions have been confirmed by dozens of studies in twelve countries, powerfully suggesting that these aspects of our universal, evolved psychology contribute to Left and Right orientations.<sup>275</sup>

If our species can be broadly separated into having Left and Right political orientations, this may be because this separation provides a so-called “evolutionarily stable strategy.”<sup>276</sup> An evolutionarily stable strategy is a particular distribution of types within a population that cannot be improved upon by a different distribution or by uniformity. Examples of evolutionarily stable strategies abound in nature, with one of the most familiar being the 50/50 sex ratio in humans.<sup>277</sup> The basic logic is that in many circumstances, it is better to have a certain variety of types rather than just one. Hammers are better than screwdrivers and saws for nailing, but if you are working on a complex project that requires more than one tool to accomplish, you are better off with a full toolkit than a dozen hammers.

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<sup>275</sup> Jost et al., “Political Conservatism”; Philip Robbins and Kenneth Shields, “Explaining Ideology: Two Factors Are Better than One,” *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014): 327.

<sup>276</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 69-87.

<sup>277</sup> Having an all-male or all-female population would obviously be disastrous, while having an 80/20 female-to-male ratio would produce a selection pressure for more males to impregnate the massive numbers of females; and an 80/20 male-to-female ratio would produce a selection pressure for more females so that more children can be produced, since males even with their billions of sperm can do nothing on their own to procreate. These selection pressures cancel out, resulting in a 50/50 sex ratio being *the* evolutionarily stable strategy in this domain.



Differences in Left-Right orientation may have provided an evolutionarily-stable variation that enabled humans to navigate the challenges of cultural evolution.<sup>278</sup> Just as evolutionarily-stable variation in personality types allow us to adapt to a wide array of environments,<sup>279</sup> evolutionarily-stable variation in political orientation may allow us to adapt our social structures to changing environments. The social change/tradition dimension concerns whether new ideas, practices, and social structures should be given a try (Left) or whether traditional ways should be followed (Right). The dimension of acceptance versus rejection of inequality may reflect the millions-of-years-old conflict between the propensity for hierarchy (Right) we inherited from our primate ancestors, and the aggressive egalitarian tendencies (Left) that evolved in hominids. In other words, “the polarization that afflicts many modern democracies may be a vestige of the mixes of the behaviorally relevant, biological predispositions that worked well in [our ancestral] small-scale societies.”<sup>280</sup> Together, a population composed of some hewing to the Left and others hewing to the Right may provide careful steering of cultural evolution.<sup>281</sup> The Right ensures that cultural evolution does not swerve too rapidly in unpredictable and potentially dangerous directions, while the Left provides the flexibility required to adapt to changing circumstances instead of driving straight ahead, unwaveringly, into a tree or off a cliff.

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<sup>278</sup> Michael Bang Petersen and Lene Aarøe, "Individual Differences in Political Ideology Are Effects of Adaptive Error Management," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014): 325; Michael Bang Petersen and Lene Aarøe, "Evolutionary Theory and Political Behavior," in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Robert A. Scott and Stephen M. Kosslyn (New York: Wiley Publishing, 2015): 11, doi: 10.1002/9781118900772.

<sup>279</sup> Michael Gurven et al., "The Evolutionary Fitness of Personality Traits in a Small-Scale Subsistence Society," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 35, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>280</sup> Hibbing et al., "Differences in Negativity," 306.

<sup>281</sup> The Left plays a similar role to DNA mutations in biological evolution: "If a species were to develop mechanisms that achieved perfect DNA replication and repair, it would evolve no further. Eventually, its environment would change; other evolving organisms would change in response to the new conditions and outcompete it for food and other resources. If this were to happen, the previously perfect organism would be at increasing disadvantage and would go extinct. With no errors, there would be no change; and in biology, unchanging perfection is a ticket to extinction." (Mayfield, 2013, 196)

### **xiii. Evolution, morality, and politics**

Like political orientations, morality has a long evolutionary history. So too, morality differs between people and cultures, and even within cultures. The vast array of different standards of morality in the world makes it difficult to summarize in a sentence, but from an evolutionary perspective, this definition suffices: "Morality is a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation."<sup>282</sup>

Recent studies of morality around the world have arrived at five basic categories, or senses, that all moral rules can be classified into: fairness, respect for authority, loyalty, sanctity, and care.<sup>283</sup> These are proposed as core components of a universal human psychology, but the way they are expressed in cultures varies widely depending on ecological, institutional, economic, and ideational (e.g., religion) factors.<sup>284</sup> Violating any one of the moral rules that cultures live by is likely to cause moral indignation, anger, and likely punishment – hence morality can be seen as a psychological adaptation to enforce certain kinds of behavior. Morality is the backbone without which cooperative human societies could never have evolved.

Fairness probably arose to solve the evolutionary challenge of supporting cooperation in the face of potential cheating and exploitation. A sense of fairness ensures that no one can make off with more than his or her own fair share, providing a key

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<sup>282</sup> Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin, 2013): 23.

<sup>283</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 153-154. Additional moral foundations have been proposed and are being investigated, including liberty, efficiency, and ownership (Graham et al., 2013, 104-105). Moral Foundations Theory has been criticized (Graham et al., 2013, 98-106), the five senses reinterpreted as variations on the moral sense of care (Schein and Gray, 2015), and alternative theories have been proposed (e.g., Lind, 2013).

<sup>284</sup> Jesse Graham et al., "Cultural Differences in Moral Judgment and Behavior, across and within Societies," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 8 (2016).

condition for large-scale cooperation to work. As with all of our moral senses, fairness is a broad feeling that can be used to support many different moral rules and social arrangements. What is considered fair in Cuba or on a kibbutz is quite different from what is considered fair in Saudi Arabia or on Wall Street. The moral sense of fairness is more acute to those on the Left compared with those on the Right.<sup>285</sup>

Respect for authority is probably the oldest form of moral sense, as it ensures that hierarchies function smoothly. Although hominid evolution broke from the hierarchal social structures of our primate relatives, the underlying genetic mechanisms still persist. For instance, in both vervet monkeys and ourselves, having more power than others and being more aggressive is associated with higher levels of whole blood serotonin.<sup>286</sup> This is just one of several biochemical mechanisms that produce the behaviors and feelings required to create a social hierarchy. Those with power have to feel and act in a more domineering manner, and those without power have to feel (or at least act) submissively, or else the hierarchy falls apart. Dominance hierarchies establish rules about who gets preferential access to resources or mates, saving animals the time and energy of constant fighting, not to mention the risk of injury or death.<sup>287</sup> Respect for authority, then, ensures that those without power will be duly submissive to those with power.<sup>288</sup> If this can be considered a moral tenet, then breaking it was the aggressive-egalitarian *Homo sapiens'* original sin. During our ancestral period, the feelings underlying deference to authority

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<sup>285</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 161.

<sup>286</sup> Douglas Madsen, "A Biochemical Property Relating to Power Seeking in Humans," *The American Political Science Review* (1985).

<sup>287</sup> John H. Kaufmann, "On the Definitions and Functions of Dominance and Territoriality," *Biological Reviews* 58, no. 1 (1983).

<sup>288</sup> It may also dispose people to be domineering toward those below them in the hierarchy, as the German folk expression *Radfahrernaturen* captures perfectly. It means "bicyclist's personality", because above the waist they bow; but below, they kick (Tuschman, *Our Political Nature*, 258, citing Theodore Adorno).

may have been exapted to help groups stick together – if egalitarian groups are themselves considered an authority, then the evolved sense of submission to an alpha male could have been repurposed to support submission to the group.<sup>289</sup> The capacity for self-denial would then have gone from supporting dominance hierarchies to supporting group cohesion. The further one is to the political Right, the more that the moral sense of authority matters.<sup>290</sup> And the more authoritarian one is, the more one is likely to believe that one's beliefs are true and supported by evidence – even when the relevant factual information is unknown or unavailable. Hence those higher in authoritarianism are less likely to challenge their beliefs, and will be more resistant to change even in the face of contrary evidence.<sup>291</sup> Loyalty as a moral sense likely evolved as the glue to hold social groups together. Our ease at creating groups would have gone nowhere without a sense of loyalty to make us stick with the group through thick and thin; and without stable groups, our aggressive egalitarian social structure could never have arisen. Loyalty makes us care for our groups more than ourselves, and this is evident from studies of politics in which self-interest is found to be a poorer predictor of political opinions than *group* interest.<sup>292</sup> Loyalty to the in-group may have helped reduce the risk of exposure to pathogens by minimizing contact with outsiders,<sup>293</sup> and could even be responsible for the formation of “pseudospecies”

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<sup>289</sup> Authoritarian individuals living in capitalist states support inequality, but authoritarian individuals in formerly communist states tend to favor egalitarian economic arrangements (Ludeke et al., 2013, 376, 379). This degree of context-specificity suggests that the respect-for-authority moral sense could well have been exapted for use in our ancestral egalitarian societies.

<sup>290</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 161.

<sup>291</sup> Herbert L. Mirels and Janet B. Dean, "Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Attitude Salience, and Beliefs about Matters of Fact," *Political Psychology* 27, no. 6 (2006): 858.

<sup>292</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 86.

<sup>293</sup> Chiao and Blizinsky, "Culture-Gene Coevolution," 3.

within humanity by erecting artificial barriers to interbreeding.<sup>294</sup> Loyalty as a moral sense is more important the further one is to the Right.<sup>295</sup>

The dark side of the loyalty moral sense is that it is often limited to a small in-group, leaving others not only outside of the scope of loyalty but out of moral consideration too. For instance, those on the Right are more concerned by threats posed by criminals, pathogens, and foreigners, while ignoring threats posed by poverty or environmental destruction. This is because the former threats more obviously affect the self and the in-group, while the latter threats are large, systemic, and affect everyone.<sup>296</sup> The loyalty moral sense is also linked to the fact that as ethnic heterogeneity increases in a society, support for redistribution of income drops.<sup>297</sup> After all, if one's loyalty is to one's own ethnic group, why share with outsiders? In fact, loyalty to one's ethnic group, or ethnocentrism, has been found to affect opinions on a broad array of even seemingly-unrelated political issues.<sup>298</sup> Sanctity is perhaps the most interesting moral sense: it is undergirded by the sense of disgust, and probably evolved as a way of keeping us from eating or interacting with poisonous or disease-causing elements in our environment. (This must have been quite important for a species that quickly colonized the planet, encountering all sorts of new and possibly dangerous plants and animals.) Today, this moral sense is an incredibly diverse exaptation, forbidding pork in some religions and beef in others, deeming menstruating women unclean here and homosexuality abhorrent there. Violations of the sense of sanctity

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<sup>294</sup> Harold J. Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 149.

<sup>295</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 161.

<sup>296</sup> Shalom H. Schwartz, "Negativity Bias and Basic Values," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2014): 328.

<sup>297</sup> Petersen and Aarøe, "Evolutionary Theory," 4-5.

<sup>298</sup> Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

produce a moral form of disgust just as strong as you would expect for an evolutionary adaptation designed to protect us from poison or infections; only now, it has been exapted for use in highly diverse, often poorly suited or nonsensical ways.

Sanctity or purity is the third moral sense that is far more important on the Right than the Left,<sup>299</sup> and it can have very strange effects. For instance, in a simple experiment in which participants filled out surveys about their political attitudes, those told to stand near a hand sanitizer dispenser temporarily became more conservative.<sup>300</sup> This has something to do with the greater sensitivity to disgust that characterizes those on the Right,<sup>301</sup> and there is some suggestive evidence that differences in genes associated with the olfactory system may be involved.<sup>302</sup>

Finally, the moral sense of care may be another extremely old exaptation, based upon the emotional response we feel toward vulnerable children or needy family members, and repurposed to apply to nonrelatives. The human mirror-neuron system may underlie this moral sense, allowing us to accurately imagine other people's suffering and motivate us to care for them.<sup>303</sup> Interestingly, this moral sense may have evolved to track only simple actions and their direct consequences; it seems to be less responsive to instances of passively-caused harm and harm involving complex causal chains (as in the concept of

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<sup>299</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 161.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>301</sup> Kevin B. Smith et al., "Disgust Sensitivity and the Neurophysiology of Left-Right Political Orientations," *PloS one* 6, no. 10 (2011).

<sup>302</sup> Hatemi et al., "A Genome-Wide," 279.

<sup>303</sup> Klein, *Survival*, 57-61.

“structural violence”).<sup>304</sup> Care, along with fairness, is the second moral sense more acute among the Left than the Right.<sup>305</sup>

Overall, while all five moral senses are important to the Right (though care and fairness rank at the bottom), on the Left the importance of care and fairness tower over loyalty, authority, and sanctity. All five clearly display an evolutionary legacy, the logic describing how and why they were selected over time. The status of loyalty, authority, and sanctity as *morals* in a philosophical rather than an evolutionary sense is, however, eminently contestable. (Interestingly, psychopaths evince a significant moral deficit in care and fairness, but no deficit in authority or sanctity, and *increased* endorsement of loyalty.)<sup>306</sup> To the extent that respect for authority overlaps with authoritarianism, sanctity overlaps with irrational prejudice, and loyalty to the in-group overlaps with ethnocentrism or even racism, many would consider them vices rather than virtues.<sup>307</sup> Care and fairness, on the other hand, have no such obvious doppelgangers. Yet respect for authority, sanctity, and loyalty have both good and bad instantiations; and with their less acute sense for these evolutionary morals, leftists may lose the good with the bad, potentially throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

#### **xiv. The significance of our evolutionary minds**

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<sup>304</sup> Greene, *Moral Tribes*, 249. For an excellent discussion of structural violence, see Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>305</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 161.

<sup>306</sup> Andrea L. Glenn et al., "Are All Types of Morality Compromised in Psychopathy?" *Journal of Personality Disorders* 23, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>307</sup> "American social conservatives are not best described as people who place special value on authority, sanctity, and loyalty, but rather as tribal loyalists – loyal to their own authorities, their own religion, and themselves. This doesn't make them evil, but it does make them parochial, tribal. In this they're akin to the world's other socially conservative tribes, from the Taliban in Afghanistan to European nationalists." (Greene, 2013, 349)

Ours is a species that stands out from the rest of nature. We started as a fairly unimpressive ape, threatened by a rapidly changing climate that reshaped our home environment and forced us to adapt quickly. The way we adapted to these changes was through an unprecedented kind of cooperation, in which we formed groups and treated other group members as other species treat relatives. (Admittedly, however, we often treated other groups' members as other species treat prey.)<sup>308</sup> This form of cooperation first enabled us to protect each other in more dangerous environments. Such cooperation was underwritten by a new kind of psychology, the egalitarian syndrome, and the social practices constituting aggressive egalitarianism, without which cooperation would necessarily break down under evolutionary pressure from cheaters and bullies. But the social intelligence this cooperation required also provided the foundation for an entirely new form of evolution: the evolution of ideas and culture. With the emergence of cultural evolution, we gained an incredible power to exploit new food sources and new environments – and exploit them we did.<sup>309</sup>

Our species colonized the world with astounding rapidity, aided by the behavioral flexibility and technology that gene-culture coevolution produced. Yet despite such flexibility, evolution has left other marks on the design of our minds. They are first and foremost fashioned for sex and survival, and our current form of rationality is still skewed towards the achievement of these fundamental goals. They are furthermore designed for social intelligence: understanding others, forming coalitions, and both designing and

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<sup>308</sup> This should not be exaggerated, however; there is no evidence for warfare – as opposed to personal inter-tribal disputes – prior to the advent of agriculture (Fry, 2013).

<sup>309</sup> Wright, *A Short History*, 108-109.



navigating social structures. In other words, politics – just on a much smaller scale than the politics of today in mass societies, without Max Stirner’s “spooks.”

Our political orientations are to some extent written into our nature in the language of DNA. We do not, however, share a uniform political nature. The evolutionary conflicts of the past – our history of proto-hominid hierarchical social structures alongside the more recent aggressive egalitarianism of *Homo sapiens*, the forces keeping us moored in place alongside those nudging us to branch out and try something new – live on in our minds. We pass some part of these propensities on to our children, which exert a pull even as they develop their own political orientations shaped by the experiences they have and the ideas they are exposed to. What commonly results from these interactions is a population split between those who are more comfortable with hierarchy and tradition, and those who are more comfortable with equality and change.

This likely was an evolutionarily stable strategy for hundreds of thousands if not millions of years. The Right side of this split ensures that cultural evolution does not proceed too fast, losing good ideas won from hard experience and quickly mutating into self-destruction. The Left side of this split ensures that cultural evolution in fact evolves, adapting to changed circumstances or improving upon adaptations to unchanged circumstances. With small changes to his terminology, what Thorstein Veblen wrote about the “leisure class” is perfect in application to the Right-leaning portion of the population:

[A]part from all deprecation, and aside from all question as to the indispensability of some [...] check on headlong innovation, the [Right], in the nature of things, consistently acts to retard that adjustment to the environment which is called social advance or development. The characteristic attitude of the [Right] may be summed

up in the maxim: "Whatever is, is right" whereas the law of natural selection, as applied to human institutions, gives the axiom: "Whatever is, is wrong." Not that the institutions of today are wholly wrong for the purposes of the life of today, but they are, always and in the nature of things, wrong to some extent. They are the result of a more or less inadequate adjustment of the methods of living to a situation which prevailed at some point in the past development; and they are therefore wrong by something more than the interval which separates the present situation from that of the past. "Right" and "wrong" are of course here used without conveying any rejection as to what ought or ought not to be. They are applied simply from the (morally colorless) evolutionary standpoint, and are intended to designate compatibility or incompatibility with the effective evolutionary process. The [Right] makes for the perpetuation of the existing maladjustment of institutions, and even favors a reversion to a somewhat more archaic scheme of life; a scheme which would be still farther out of adjustment with the exigencies of life under the existing situation even than the accredited, obsolescent scheme that has come down from the immediate past. [...] When an explanation of this [...] conservatism is offered, it is commonly the invidious one that the [Right] opposes innovation because it has a vested interest, of an unworthy sort, in maintaining the present conditions. *The explanation here put forward imputes no unworthy motive.* The opposition of the [Right] to changes in the cultural scheme is instinctive, and does not rest primarily on an interested calculation of material advantages; it is an instinctive revulsion at

any departure from the accepted way of doing and of looking at things – a revulsion common to all men and only to be overcome by stress of circumstances.<sup>310</sup>

By the same token, the Left is characterized by an “instinctive revulsion” at inequality and social stasis. Its role in the evolutionary system is to inject mutations – innovations – some of which may be harmful, others of which may be helpful. And once an innovation introduced by the Left is accepted by society, the Right slowly comes to protect it as part of tradition. As Hannah Arendt once observed: “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.”<sup>311</sup> This describes the evolutionary system produced by the aggregate of our individual political orientations.

Where human social evolution will go is a question impossible to accurately answer by its very nature. Evolution is intrinsically unpredictable, although evolutionary pressures can be identified and plausible solutions imagined.<sup>312</sup> One of the key current pressures is the conflict between our very young contemporary hierarchal social structure and our evolved egalitarian impulses.<sup>313</sup> How cultural evolution will navigate this conflict is uncertain; but what is certain is that to keep any evolutionary system functioning well, it is essential to have a balance between change-generating and stability-maintaining mechanisms. The circulatory system of cultural evolution, the media, must provide the ingredients for both stasis and change. Providing narratives that overwhelmingly support the status quo can only lead to social sclerosis, while providing narratives supportive only of continual and radical experimentation mimics the uncontrollable mutations of cancer. It

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<sup>310</sup> Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 123, 128. Emphasis added.

<sup>311</sup> Quoted in George Seldes, *The Great Thoughts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985): 16.

<sup>312</sup> Runciman, *Theory of Cultural*, 195-196.

<sup>313</sup> Boehm, *Moral Origins*, 348-349.

is best for the media at the very least to ensure diversity, to allow, in the best conservative tradition, our evolved minds to continue as they have for hundreds of thousands of years.

## Chapter 3

### When Our Evolved Minds Go Wrong – Social Psychological Biases

*"A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."*

- James Madison, Letter to W. T. Barry

*"It is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power denied to error or prevailing against the dungeon and the stake. Men are not more zealous for truth than they often are for error and a sufficient application of legal or even of social penalty will generally succeed in stopping the propagation of either. The real advantage which truth has consists in this, that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it."*

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

The great struggle between the first conservatives and liberals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was definitively won by the liberals. Their victory was so thorough and encompassing that even modern-day conservatives have adopted the early liberal vision regarding the extent of human capacities, and, flowing directly from this, what the ideal form of government is. Today's conservatives (in the U.S.; Spain, Brazil, Thailand, and other countries still have proponents of monarchy) do not argue that an aristocracy or monarchy is required for the ordering and flourishing of human society; instead, they agree with the

early liberals that democracy (if a representative democracy) is the best possible and only legitimate form of government. While the first conservatives worried that the fading away of institutions like the aristocracy and monarchy would destroy the bonds that held societies together, resulting in bloody struggles and societal disintegration, modern conservatives have adapted themselves to the idea that democratic, market-based societies are not only healthy, but are the ideal form of large-scale human organization. In a way, modern conservatives resemble early liberals more than modern liberals do. The ideas characterizing modern liberalism have evolved far beyond that which early liberals would have been prepared to contemplate: the equality of human “races” and sexes, the illegitimacy of imperialism, gay rights, etc. And while modern liberals in the U.S. support a government-provided social safety net, modern U.S. conservatives hold truer to the classical liberal position of limited government.

But what is the classical liberal vision of human capacities that informs the political worldview held by modern-day conservatives and liberals alike? What are humans believed to be capable of, such that democracy and freedom are held to be not only our natural birthright, but the only legitimate way to organize society? In the liberal vision of human capacities, we are all rational beings who have the right and the ability to choose our pursuits in life, and to participate in our own self-government.<sup>1</sup> No doubt influenced by the view of the soul as the seat of reason, separate and distinct from our animal nature,

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<sup>1</sup> However, see Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 297-307. Wolin argues that while “liberalism has come to be identified with the view that man is essentially rational in nature and that his conduct is in fact governed by reason ... this widespread notion about liberalism is quite mistaken.” He notes that classical liberal writers frequently acknowledged the irrationality of the human psyche, but that their observations were later jettisoned to provide surer foundations for classical economics (as it merged with political liberalism), which needed a strong form of human rationality to be coherent.

liberals from the very beginning believed that we are beings capable of reasoning our way to the truth. As more and more people over the ages jettisoned the idea of the soul as a reasoning machine, the mind seamlessly succeeded the soul as the seat of reason. Whether due to a spiritual soul or a corporeal brain, the liberal vision retained a belief that humans are good reasoners. And as such, humanity should flourish where our capacity for self-directed reasoning was allowed free rein. No monarchy or aristocracy is needed to govern individuals who can best decide for themselves what they want and how they can achieve it, and who can collectively create an effective government by voting in their own individual, well-informed interests.

It is this vision of human capacities that informed John Stuart Mill in arguing for freedom of thought and expression. In Mill's view, humans need no paternalistic intervention from the state or church to regulate the contents of the mind. As good reasoners, humans should be allowed to believe whatever they want, and to express their beliefs as they see fit. To the conservatives of his day, this must have seemed a recipe for disaster, as liberty of expression would allow for all sorts of harmful (and possibly fatal) ideas to spread throughout society. But in Mill's liberal view, it was "important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs."<sup>2</sup> Freedom of expression would subject all ideas to the discretion of the human mind: and as natural selection creates the survival of the fittest animals, free human minds would collectively (if *eventually*) select only the best, truest, and most beneficial ideas. In the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas ... the best test of truth is the power of

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<sup>2</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 39.

the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market...”<sup>3</sup> This helped introduce the modern “marketplace of ideas” metaphor, and it forms the backbone of the liberal defense of freedom of expression.<sup>4</sup>

Marketplaces “work” because they are the aggregate of countless individuals pursuing their own self-interest, and this is hypothesized to provide the best possible collective outcome: better than any one individual or group making decisions for the whole.<sup>5</sup> A free market of ideas works to the extent to which information is freely shared, debated, and selected on the basis of its merit by intelligent, rational individuals. Take any one of these elements away, and you have a failed marketplace of ideas, one which does not select the best ideas available and instead allows bad, untruthful, or just outdated ideas to proliferate.<sup>6</sup> One of the ways that a marketplace of ideas can fail to achieve an ideal outcome is what concerned Justice Holmes in his dissent in the *Abrams* case: censorship. By preventing ideas perceived as harmful or wrong from entering public discussion, a market distortion is created that frustrates market mechanisms from producing ideal outcomes. At issue in *Abrams* were leaflets arguing against U.S. military intervention in the Russian Revolution; even supposing the ideas contained in the leaflets to be untruthful or wrong, censoring them might even provide them a certain veneer of legitimacy which could propel them to spread at a greater rate than if they were open to withering criticism and refutation in the free market of ideas. While Holmes was in the minority at the time he

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<sup>3</sup> *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616. (1919): 630.

<sup>4</sup> John Durham Peters, “The Marketplace of Ideas’: A History of the Concept” in *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Andrew Calabrese and Colin Sparks, 65-82 (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004): 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Mill, however, acknowledged impediments that have fallen out of view of today’s “marketplace” proponents (Peters, 2004, 71).



wrote his dissenting opinion, by now his disdain for censorship and embrace of the marketplace of ideas is the majority opinion.<sup>7</sup> Modern liberals and conservatives alike have embraced the marketplace of ideas and its promise of providing an ideal environment for the evolution of ideas.

But what of other possible market failures – for instance, a marketplace in which information is freely shared and debated on the basis of perceived merit, but selection is not performed by intelligent, rational individuals? In other words, what if the liberal vision of human capacities is wrong, and we are not nearly-perfect reasoners, cognizers, thinkers, and perceivers? As the liberal political philosopher John Rawls conceded, for liberalism to work, citizens must be “capable of revising and changing [their conception of the good] on reasonable and rational grounds...”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “[r]ational autonomy ... rests on persons’ intellectual and moral powers. It is shown in their exercising their capacity to form, to revise, and to pursue a conception of the good, and to deliberate in accordance with it.”<sup>9</sup> His moral psychology is explicitly philosophical instead of psychological, yet he does propose a conception of moral psychology that can be examined on purely psychological grounds: “besides a capacity for a conception of the good, citizens have a capacity to acquire conceptions of justice and fairness and a desire to act as these conceptions require.”<sup>10</sup> For liberalism to be practicable, “its requirements and ideal of

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<sup>7</sup> As Justice Cardozo wrote:

The voice of the majority may be that of force triumphant, content with the plaudits of the hour, and recking little of the morrow. The dissenter speaks to the future, and his voice is pitched to a key that will carry through the years. Read some of the great dissents ... and feel after the cooling time of the better part of a century the glow and fire of a faith that was content to bide its hour. The prophet and martyr do not see the hooting throng. Their eyes are fixed on the eternities. (Quoted in Hanks et al., *Elements of Law*, 1994, 123)

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005): 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

citizenship must be ones that people can understand and apply,”<sup>11</sup> given our human psychology. If political liberalism relies on a rational moral psychology to be practicable, then a question of the greatest importance is: to what extent are we rational?

To answer these questions, we now turn to what social psychologists have discovered about the human mind. Far from approximating the ideal of a rational soul created by God to enable humans to reason well, or the subsequent ideal of a purely material mind that does just what the soul was proposed to be capable of, the human mind is deeply and systematically flawed. It is just as unlikely to have been designed by a Creator for the purpose of best facilitating pure reason, as it is to have *evolved* for the purpose of best facilitating pure reason. The evidence to this point suggests instead that the human mind evolved for the same reasons as every other product of evolution: for self-propagation in an at once competitive and cooperative natural environment.<sup>12</sup> The picture of the human mind that emerges from social psychological research is one that would surely shock classical liberals. And because classical liberals have informed so much of what are now uncontroversial, widely-shared beliefs about politics and social organization, the reality of the human mind may seem deeply disturbing to many of us today. Yet its aspects that seem as weaknesses or alarming flaws from a liberal perspective have the potential of being overcome and superseded – *if*, and most likely *only if*, we evolve our

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 87. Rawls recognized that “[h]uman nature and its natural psychology are permissive: they may limit the viable conceptions of persons and ideals of citizenship, and the moral psychologies that may support them...”

<sup>12</sup> One of the most fascinating results of the evolution of our minds is that they are more sensitive to bad than good, across a wide variety of domains (Baumeister et al., 2001). This makes sense from the perspective of evolution as a continual struggle against entropy: bad phenomena at their worst promise death, total entropy, a final and irreversible end to evolutionary fitness; while good phenomena at their very best promise only a temporary defense against entropy, a fleeting increase in evolutionary fitness (food, comfort, sex).

institutions beyond the form in which they were shaped by the liberal view of human capacities.

After a brief discussion of social psychology and its key findings, this chapter will cover a number of biases that may affect the way our brains acquire ideas and a conception of a good, deliberate on them, and revise them (or not) in light of new information. These biases, or deviations from the liberal ideal of human rationality, include: belief bias, confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance reduction, meaning maintenance, in-group bias, groupthink, group polarization, belief persistence and memory problems, system justification tendency, attitude inoculation, ideological segregation, moral rationalization, self-deception, and styles of thought. Finally, they will be discussed in light of their consequences to democratic theory, particularly as regards the media as the lynchpin institution of democracy.

### **i. How psychology explains the brain's contribution to information ecology**

Psychology may be a late bloomer among the sciences. While major advances in mathematics occurred in antiquity, and significant progress in physics is centuries-old, the workings of the human mind remained mired in the realm of speculation until relatively recently. As the great American philosopher George Santayana explained:

The idea of the physical world is the first flower or thick cream of practical thinking. Being skimmed off first and proving so nutritious, it leaves the liquid below somewhat thin and unsavoury. Especially does this result appear when science is still unpruned and mythical, so that what passes into the idea of material nature is

much more than the truly causal network of forces, and includes many spiritual and moral functions.<sup>13</sup>

Sigmund Freud, whose life's work ended less than a century ago, is considered by many today as merely a glorified armchair theorist.<sup>14</sup> While his theories have become widespread and popular, they were arrived at not by the scientific method of hypothesis creation and experimental testing, but by supposition and extrapolation from the patients he treated. Once subjected to scientific scrutiny, his theories have not fared well.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the reason for the slow progress of psychology has been the inherent difficulty of applying the scientific method to the study of the human mind. Test tubes and microscopes avail the psychologist nothing, and ethical concerns prevent running large-scale experiments that drastically alter the mind or its social environment to measure effects. Hence, progress in psychology is slow and piecemeal, probably more so than in most other fields of science. Social psychology is particularly hamstrung, not only by the staggering complexity of the brain, but by the complexity of our social reality, which is hardly amenable to the reduction and isolation of just one discrete element or process to experiment with.

Nonetheless, social psychologists have made considerable recent progress in uncovering how our minds work in dealing with our shared social reality. This has been accomplished by creating artificial (often social) situations or thinking tasks, manipulating one or more aspects of them, and measuring behavioral or cognitive changes in response to

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<sup>13</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998): 29.

<sup>14</sup> For withering criticism, see Frederick C. Crews and his critics, *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Edward Erwin, *A Final Accounting: Philosophical and Empirical Issues in Freudian Psychology* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1996).

the manipulation. When successful, what this accomplishes is an improved understanding of a particular social phenomenon or process. While in real life multiple social processes operate concurrently and interdependently, experiments in social psychology isolate individual processes so as to better understand them. What emerges, from a bird's eye view of social psychological research, is a better idea of what is going on behind the scenes in the human minds that make up societies. Predictions about overall social outcomes (like whether the U.S. will evolve into a more or less egalitarian society) are hard to come by, since they comprise innumerable individual- and societal-level processes operating at the same time; but explanations of the processes involved in social evolution are possible to derive.

This strategy faces significant challenges, however. Due to the heterogeneity of people's cultures, beliefs, and memes, "generalizations from one locale to another may express nothing more than the parochialism of those who make the generalizations."<sup>16</sup> We have seen this mistake made in some evolutionary psychology research in the previous chapter, but the problem is more widespread. Since most research in social psychology has used U.S. college students as participants, the "locale" from which generalizations are made is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic – or WEIRD.<sup>17</sup> Hence it is problematic to assume that the results of social psychological experiments on WEIRD populations are features of universal human psychology, as the hypothesis that such results are caused by one particular social environment cannot be disconfirmed.<sup>18</sup> A review

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<sup>16</sup> Friedman, *No Exit*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Henrich et al., "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2-3 (2010): 61.

<sup>18</sup> Yehuda Amir and Irit Sharon, "Are Social Psychological Laws Cross-Culturally Valid?" *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 18, no. 4 (1987). The authors tested a sample of social-psychological findings from the U.S. on (culturally-similar) Israelis, and found that a majority of findings could not be replicated. Hence it

of the differences between WEIRD populations and others from around the world concluded: “The sample of contemporary Western undergraduates that so overwhelms our database is not just an extraordinarily restricted sample of humanity; it is frequently a distinct outlier vis-à-vis other global samples. It may represent the worst population on which to base our understanding of *Homo sapiens*.”<sup>19</sup> This has led many psychologists to reject an empiricist approach in favor of a more holistic, qualitative methodology focusing more on ideational and cultural influences from the social environment.<sup>20</sup>

However, this problem only affects attempts to confidently generalize from the population studied to humanity as a whole. *Tentative* generalizations, keeping in mind the limitations of the available evidence, are immune. For instance, take the (ironically-named)<sup>21</sup> “fundamental attribution error”: once thought to describe *humanity’s* tendency to focus on intrinsic dispositions while ignoring situational influences, research on populations around the world have revealed it to be the product of certain cultural and ideational influences in Western societies.<sup>22</sup> Hence, any phenomenon uncovered by experiments on one population may be provisionally considered to be part of universal psychology; but this remains an untested hypothesis until a variety of different populations are tested. Many of the phenomena discussed in this chapter have not yet been tested on a sufficiently diverse set of populations, and as such, their status as features of universal human psychology should be considered a hypothesis.

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is good to keep in mind: “For all intents and purposes, social psychology is the study of second-year American psychology students” (Amir and Sharon, 1987, 385).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Ironic, because it can also describe the error of attributing the phenomenon it describes to humanity as a whole, rather than certain populations within in it.

<sup>22</sup> Henrich et al., “The Weirdest,” 72.

They can be considered as features of human psychology in *Western* societies with a higher degree of confidence, however – possibly as the product of universal psychology interacting with Western social environments. The results of social psychological research have been found to be about as consistent as the results of research in physics.<sup>23</sup> However, a recent large-scale attempt to replicate a random sample of social psychological findings succeeded only slightly over one third of the time.<sup>24</sup> Yet a later analysis of this replication project found that context sensitivity was significantly correlated with replication success – that is, the more context-sensitive the original results were, the less likely they would be successfully replicated by other researchers.<sup>25</sup> This is another side of the generalization problem: not only are generalizations across cultures problematic, but generalizing beyond the unique contexts of particular social psychological experiments can also be problematic. Likewise, the solution here is additional replication.<sup>26</sup>

Another critique centers on the apparent domination of social psychology by liberals, which makes conservative students less likely to enter the field or have research papers accepted.<sup>27</sup> As the authors' choice of terminology suggests (liberal/conservative), however, their argument applies only to the Anglosphere; a look at Eastern Europe suggests instead that social psychologists across cultures tend to set themselves in

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<sup>23</sup> Larry V. Hedges, "How Hard is Hard Science, How Soft is Soft Science? The Empirical Cumulativeness of Research," *American Psychologist* 42, no. 5 (1987).

<sup>24</sup> Open Science Collaboration, "Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science," *Science* 349, no. 6251 (2015).

<sup>25</sup> Jay J. Van Bavel et al., "Contextual Sensitivity in Scientific Reproducibility," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Scott E. Maxwell et al., "Is Psychology Suffering From a Replication Crisis? What Does "Failure to Replicate" Really Mean?" *American Psychologist* 70, no. 6 (2015).

<sup>27</sup> José L. Duarte et al., "Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38 (2015). One irony of this argument is that concern for diversity and inclusivity is itself characteristically liberal. As Stephen Colbert pointed out to Jonathan Haidt during an interview: "if you were a liberal, and now you can sort of see a point of the conservative side – I'm here to tell you, that's a *liberal* idea." (Colbert and Haidt, 2012, 5:33)

opposition to the ideology of the lower class in their society.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, scientists in a broad variety of sciences are more liberal – and drastically less religious – than the general population of the U.S., a concomitant of the Enlightenment elevation of science over religion.<sup>29</sup> Unmentioned by the authors of the critique, but possibly more important and certainly more insidious, would be a bias toward the methodological status quo<sup>30</sup> and pressure to publish producing a bias toward positive results.<sup>31</sup> (Similar biases in economics have produced disastrous results.)<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, such biases are rife in science – and institutional responses are needed to mute them to the extent possible. However, as the philosopher of science Miriam Solomon points out, they should be called (the epistemically-neutral) “decision vectors,” since the history of science shows them to be variably conducive *and* harmful to scientific progress: “[t]hus the widespread practice of calling them ‘biasing factors,’ which suggests undesirable irrationality, is inappropriately judgmental... [Their] influence *may or may not* be conducive to scientific success...”<sup>33</sup>

As Santayana implied, and Auguste Comte made explicit, psychology is intrinsically a more difficult subject to study scientifically than “simpler,” or less complex, fields like physics and chemistry.<sup>34</sup> If chemistry is an emergent phenomenon of physics, and biology emerges from chemistry, psychology emerges from biology, etc., then the social sciences

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<sup>28</sup> Michal Bilewicz et al., "Is Liberal Bias Universal? An International Perspective on Social Psychologists," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38 (2015).

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "Method and Matter in the Social Sciences: Umbilically Tied to the Enlightenment." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38 (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Albert Pepitone, "Lessons from the History of Social Psychology," *American Psychologist* 36, no. 9 (1981).

<sup>31</sup> Daniele Fanelli, "Do Pressures to Publish Increase Scientists' Bias? An Empirical Support from US States Data." *PloS one* 5, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>32</sup> Lawson, Tony. "Contemporary Economics and the Crisis." *Real-World Economics Review* 50 (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Miriam Solomon, *Social Empiricism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001): 53. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Dean Keith Simonton, "Psychology as a Science within Comte's Hypothesized Hierarchy: Empirical Investigations and Conceptual Implications," *Review of General Psychology* 19, no. 3 (2015).



are unavoidably more complex than the physical sciences.<sup>35</sup> At each succeeding level, the laws and regularities of the previous level remain, but are joined by their own emergent set of forces and tendencies. As such, the best we can expect from sciences of greater complexity like psychology are exploratory attempts to pick apart the variety of forces and tendencies at play in the complex systems of the human mind and society.<sup>36</sup> We should not expect to identify scientific *laws* or certainties, but contingent probabilities.<sup>37</sup> The only other apparent alternative is a retreat into some form of radical skepticism, with all of its attendant problems.<sup>38</sup>

## ii. A bias tour of the human mind

*"He who believes in freedom of the will has never loved and never hated."*

- Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, *Aphorisms*

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<sup>35</sup> E.g., Morowitz, *The Emergence*; Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory*.

<sup>37</sup> As Hayek argued:

[T]he conception of law in the usual sense has little application to the theory of complex phenomena... If we assume that all the other parameters of such a system of equations describing a complex structure are constant, we can of course still call the dependence of one of the latter on the other a 'law' and describe a change in the one as 'the cause' and the change in the other as 'the effect'. But such a 'law' would be valid only for one particular set of values of all the other parameters and would change with every change in any one of them. This would evidently not be a very useful conception of a 'law', and the only generally valid statement about the regularities of the structure in question is the whole set of simultaneous equations from which, if the values of the parameters are continuously variable, an infinite number of particular laws, showing the dependence of one variable upon another, could be derived. ...[T]hough we possess theories of social structures, I rather doubt whether we know of any 'laws' which social phenomena obey. It would then appear that the search for the discovery of laws is not an appropriate hallmark of scientific procedure but merely a characteristic of the theories of simple phenomena... and that in the field of complex phenomena the term 'law' as well as the concepts of cause and effect are not applicable without such modification as to deprive them of their ordinary meaning. ...[T]he prejudice that in order to be scientific one must produce laws may yet prove to be one of the most harmful of methodological conceptions." (Hayek, 1967, 41-42)

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2007); David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005).

As an introduction, let us take a look at an aspect of the human mind that makes our humanity what it is: morality. In the liberal and the popular view, morality is the product of moral reasoning. We all learn a code of morality as children, and as we grow and develop, we modify, develop, and expand our morality as experience teaches us. When we are presented with a moral question, we ponder it, consider the various factors involved, and then arrive at a conclusion. Or, so it seems.

The reality, as uncovered by a number of experimental studies, is that when presented with a moral dilemma, we first have an automatic, unconscious, gut reaction: either something is morally right, or morally wrong. Then, after our minds have arrived at a moral conclusion largely without any conscious awareness, our reasoning kicks in. Not, mind you, to determine whether our gut instinct was in fact correct – rather, our conscious reasoning process kicks in to act as a sort of lawyer for our unconscious moral decision.<sup>39</sup> Instead of coolly subjecting a moral question to our powers of reasoning, as the liberal view would have it, our brains quickly and unconsciously arrive at a moral decision, and then our reasoning process is left with devising an explanation for why we arrived at the decision we did.<sup>40</sup> We are not judges when it comes to moral questions; we are lawyers, who are presented with a client and then tasked with creating an exculpatory argument. This counterintuitive reality has been unveiled through a number of experimental studies across several countries. One example: experimental participants are presented with a hypothetical about a brother and sister who decide to have sex using birth control pills and

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001); Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

<sup>40</sup> Peter H. Ditto and Brittany S. Liu. "Moral Coherence and Political Conflict," in *Social Psychology of Political Polarization*, ed. Piercarlo Valdesolo and Jesse Graham, 102-122 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

a condom.<sup>41</sup> They both enjoy the experience, but decide never to do it again, keeping it instead as a secret between them and a special experience that brought them closer together. The participants were then asked whether what the brother and sister did was wrong. As this story touches upon the incest taboo, it is not surprising that 80 percent of participants reported that what the siblings did was morally wrong. What is surprising, and revelatory, is how they reacted to questioning about their moral decisions. Every avenue of reasoning the participants opened up to defend their decision was shut down by the experimenter (“inbreeding causes deformity” – “but there was no chance of pregnancy”; “I was brought up to view incest as wrong” – “but if you are brought up to view women working outside the home as wrong, would that make it wrong?”). In the end, participants were left uncomfortably clinging to just the *feeling* of the sex being wrong, without any rational justification for it.

In another study, participants were hypnotized to feel a wave of disgust after seeing a certain neutral word, like “take” or “often.”<sup>42</sup> Then they were presented with six short stories concerning moral violations. When the story contained the neutral word participants had been hypnotized to feel disgust over, the moral violations in the stories were judged to be *more* wrong and morally disgusting. Most interesting is the seventh story that did not contain any moral violation at all – it was about a thoughtful student council president who picked interesting topics for discussions. When the story contained the manipulated “disgust word,” a third of the participants actually condemned the thoughtful student council president. All of the hypnotized participants had felt a mild wave of disgust

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<sup>41</sup> Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 38-44.

<sup>42</sup> Thalia Wheatley and Jonathan Haidt, "Hypnotic Disgust Makes Moral Judgments More Severe," *Psychological Science* 16, no. 10 (2005).

when they saw “take” or “often” in the story – but most of them had overruled their initial gut reaction, and instead their reasoning process kicked in to judge the student council president as good. For the rest, their reasoning process kicked in only to create a tortured justification for their gut reaction, calling the student council president a “popularity-seeking snob” for trying to please others, or voicing suspicions about his intentions. Supporting this view of our moral sense as one that begins unconsciously, and then is ratified by a conscious process of justification, are experiments on moral evaluation and how it shapes factual beliefs.<sup>43</sup> The experimental results powerfully suggest that when faced with a moral dilemma, we first make an instinctual, unconscious decision about the morally correct response; then we take a biased view of the evidence to make a case that our morally correct response would also lead to the best practical outcome as well. Even reading persuasive essays about the morality of capital punishment – which did not contain any arguments regarding the deterrent effect of the death penalty or other practical consequences – was found to change participants’ factual assessments of whether capital punishment deterred future crime (for the pro-death penalty essay) or if it led to miscarriages of justice (for the anti-death penalty essay). Although it seems – and we would like to think – that we first think through facts and make rational, conscious deliberations to decide moral questions, the reality is the other way around. We unconsciously make moral determinations, and then take a biased tour through the facts in order to contrive a justification for our moral determination.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Brittany S. Liu and Peter H. Ditto, “What Dilemma? Moral Evaluation Shapes Factual Belief,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 4, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>44</sup> This may also help explain the imperviousness to facts displayed by political partisans (Kahan and Braman, 2006). The concept of “cultural cognition” includes ideational influences (a “vision of a good society”), but also encompasses the range of psychological factors known to correlate with political ideology.

Granted, seeing our own process of reasoning as a mere lawyer hired to defend the conclusions arrived at by a part of our brains we do not feel we have control over is unsettling, and counterintuitive. That certainly is not how it *feels* to reason over moral questions. Yet even more unsettling are experimental studies of people who have undergone split-brain surgery.

Some people with severe epileptic seizures have undergone surgery to sever the neural fibers that connect the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Since the left eye communicates directly with the right cerebral hemisphere, and the right eye with the left hemisphere, scientists have been able to study split-brain patients to see how the two hemispheres interact.<sup>45</sup> In a series of experiments, participants were presented with a written command seen only by the left eye, which is connected with the right cerebral hemisphere. Since the participants had undergone the surgery that severed the connection between their right and left hemispheres, the left hemisphere (which is where most verbal processing occurs) had no exposure whatsoever to the command displayed to the left eye. Then, the participants were asked why they performed the command. In answering, the participants were using their verbal-dominant left hemispheres, which had no knowledge of the command itself, only the knowledge that the participant had in fact performed an action. Shockingly, whatever the participants had been commanded to do, the left sides of their brains came up with a plausible reason. Of course, this was not the real reason: the real reason is that they were following the instruction the right side of their brains had processed. What is shocking is that the natural reaction was not just to say “I don’t know,”

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<sup>45</sup> Michael S. Gazzaniga, “Forty-Five Years of Split-Brain Research and Still Going Strong,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 6 no. 8 (2005).

but instead to generate a made-up, *ad hoc* rationalization. For instance, when one participant had been instructed to get up and walk via a message to the right side of their brain, when asked “why,” their left side came up with the reason that they were walking away to get a soda.<sup>46</sup> Most importantly, these participants had no idea that they were making anything up; they felt as though they were being entirely genuine.

Decades of split-brain research by Michael Gazzaniga led him to propose the existence of an “interpreter” mechanism in the verbal-dominant left hemisphere of our brain.<sup>47</sup> It seems as though this interpreter monitors other areas of our brains, and then generates narrative explanations for what occurs there. In his view, the interpreter mechanism is essentially what we feel to *be* human: our sense of being the person we are, with free will and the ability to make decisions. However, as the split-brain experiments suggest, the interpreter in our brains may simply be telling us a story. And it is the feeling of the story being made that we may mistake for the liberal ideal of a rational control center in our minds.

But not all psychological research challenges our intuitions about how our minds work at such a profound level. Lots of psychological research challenges our intuitions about how our minds work at a mundane level as well. For instance, the liberal view in economics has traditionally assumed that humans are epistemological gods and native number crunchers, capable of absorbing all relevant information from the environment and performing accurate calculations of utility and expected future utility.<sup>48</sup> There is even a

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<sup>46</sup> Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Nature's Mind: The Biological Roots of Thinking, Emotions, Sexuality, Language, and Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1992): 122-129.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-137; Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2000): 1-27.

<sup>48</sup> This same view informs approaches in political science that draw inspiration from neoclassical economics. Their Achilles' heel is their psychologically unrealistic epistemology: the assumption that

supposition in neoclassical economics that increases in national debt set off a wave of people making complicated calculations about future tax increases required to pay the debt (after interest rates for government bonds increase due to future investors' higher perceived risk of holding the debt due to its increased amount hence higher risk of default); then these human supercomputers make cuts in current expenditures proportional (after time-discounting) to the expected increase in their future tax burden – and the economy suffers. Of course, we hardly need psychological research to realize why this supposition is absurd. But psychological research does reveal some interesting, unexpected, and stable patterns of irrationality in our most basic calculations.<sup>49</sup> These are called heuristics, or decision-making shortcuts, and we are perfectly unaware that we use them. Heuristics make calculations less mentally taxing, but also less accurate. They are exactly what we would expect to find in a mind produced by evolution, favoring economy over perfection. For instance, our reasoning is biased by the “representativeness” and “availability” heuristics.<sup>50</sup> The representativeness heuristic biases our judgments of probability, by making membership in a category seem more probable than it really is on the basis of features we associate with that category. The availability heuristic also biases our judgments of probability, by basing our judgments of how likely we think an event is on how easily we can recall examples of the event. What this means is that we tend to judge the likelihood or probability of something on the basis of how often we have experienced it, and how well we remember and categorize the experiences. Thus, we might know that it is

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humans can easily and unproblematically collect all information relevant to economic and political decisions, process it rationally, and decide accordingly (Rosenberg, 1995).

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of critiques of this approach, see Peter B.M. Vranas, “Gigerenzer’s Normative Critique of Kahneman and Tversky,” *Cognition*, 72 (2000).

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Kahneman, “A Perspective on Judgment and Choice: Mapping Bounded Rationality,” *American Psychologist* 58, no. 9 (2003).

a fact that only 1% of a certain minority group has ever committed a crime. Yet, if we remember salient examples (from television or personal experiences) of a member of that minority group committing a crime, we will use those memories instead of the statistical fact to judge a newly encountered member of that minority group. So we may know that statistically only a fraction of one percent of Anglo-Saxons are financial criminals; but if we see a few salient examples of Anglo-Saxon financial crooks in the media, when we first encounter an unknown Anglo-Saxon, we may find ourselves unconsciously feeling for our wallets.

Research into biases in simple reasoning and calculations is vast. It has uncovered a surprising number of such biases, from anchoring (being influenced in one's numerical estimates by simple exposure to a random number), to framing effects (the same proposition presented in different ways will be responded to differently on the basis of the presentation), and the endowment effect (we value something we already own more highly than that very same thing if we do not own it). This research has revealed that we are "risk averse" for potential gains, and "risk seeking" for potential losses. In other words, when we are in danger of losing we are more likely to take a gamble that would either greatly deepen the loss or eliminate it altogether; but when we stand to gain something, we are less likely to take a gamble that would either greatly increase our gain or eliminate it altogether.<sup>51</sup> Not only do these heuristics and biases of ours violate the liberal view of human rationality, they also prove that the models of human calculations used by liberal (neoclassical) economics are describing something other than human actors.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 703-705.



Lest these seem like biases affecting only bean counting, loss aversion can affect even whether or not we support our country waging a war: when a war is sold as preventative and defensive, we are more likely to support it versus when it is sold as promoting some form of gain.<sup>52</sup> In fact, when Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon reviewed 40 years of psychological research on biases, they were startled to find that *all* of them favored proponents of war: “These psychological impulses ... incline national leaders to exaggerate the evil intentions of adversaries, to misjudge how adversaries perceive them, to be overly sanguine when hostilities start, and overly reluctant to make necessary concessions in negotiations. In short, these biases have the effect of making war.”<sup>53</sup>

This and other research has uncovered two distinct systems of thought at play in the human mind.<sup>54</sup> System 1 is fast and effortless thought, performed automatically and unconsciously, emotionally charged at times, and difficult to consciously control or modify. System 2 thought is slower, piece by piece, effortful, flexible, conscious and intentionally directed.<sup>55</sup> Heuristics and moral judgments are part of System 1 thought, while the rationalizations or justifications for moral judgments are part of System 2 thought. In fact, many of the simpler decision biases of System 1 thought may be caused by systematic errors in the way we store and retrieve information, errors which make our judgments irrational in a predictable manner.<sup>56</sup> System 2 is far more complex, and is likely to be where Gazzaniga’s “interpreter” resides. Therefore, it seems that in a manner reminiscent of split-

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<sup>52</sup> Miroslav Nincic, "Loss Aversion and the Domestic Context of Military Intervention," *Political Research Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1997).

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon, "Why Hawks Win," *Foreign Policy*, no. 158 (January/February 2007): 36.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan St. B.T. Evans and Keith E. Stanovich, "Dual-Process Theories of Higher Cognition: Advancing the Debate," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (2013): 223-241.

<sup>55</sup> Kahneman, "A Perspective," 698-699.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Hilbert, "Toward a Synthesis of Cognitive Biases: How Noisy Information Processing Can Bias Human Decision Making," *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 2 (2012).

brain patients, we are only conscious of one half of our mind. While System 1 is busy whirring away, making judgments and decisions on its own without our conscious awareness (we are aware only of the results), System 2 is the aspect of our thought that makes up what it *feels* like to think: conscious, deliberative, and rational. The liberal view, like our own subjective experience, sees only System 2.

This phenomenon of unconscious (System 1) and conscious (System 2) thought processes operating in tandem is demonstrated clearly in research on persuasion. When we think about being persuaded of something, we feel like the process involved is something like this: we hear an argument, think about its merits and demerits, and decide whether it convinces us or not. In the research, this is what is referred to as the “central route” to persuasion or attitude change, and it involves conscious, effortful System 2 thought. Strangely, however, there is another route to persuasion, the so-called “peripheral route.” The peripheral route to attitude change is a System 1 process, and it operates outside of conscious awareness. In fact, it operates precisely when our conscious attention is focused elsewhere: for instance, when we are distracted, attending to something else, or for whatever reason not paying much attention to a message. We would think that strong arguments tend to be convincing, while weak arguments rarely convince us – and this is in fact what happens when we are using System 2, central route processing. However, when we are distracted and using System 1, peripheral route processing, *weak* arguments can have a better chance of convincing us than strong arguments.<sup>57</sup> Peripheral route processing uses simple cues to determine whether a message is trustworthy and convincing: the

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<sup>57</sup> Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, “The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 19, edited by Leonard Berkowitz, 1-24 (New York: Springer, 1986).

attractiveness, likeability, or expert status of the speaker, the simplicity of the message, or whether the message is in a low-effort medium like radio or television as opposed to writing. Thankfully, personal involvement in an issue as well as having a personality that enjoys thinking make System 2, central route processing more likely; yet, that still leaves countless messages we are bombarded with on a daily basis to be processed by our unconscious System 1.<sup>58</sup>

The confidence we have in our thoughts also affects the likelihood we will be convinced by a message when we are using System 2 processing.<sup>59</sup> This is certainly a good thing, as it suggests that we are less likely to be convinced of an argument if we are not confident in our response to the argument. For instance, perhaps we do not know much about a proposed trade agreement and the economic theory underlying it; when we are exposed to a strong argument in favor of the agreement, we recognize our incompetence in the area, are less confident about our reaction to the argument, and we are less likely to be convinced. So far, so good. The problem is: we are terrible judges of our own competence. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The wise know too well their weakness to assume infallibility; and he who knows most, knows best how little he knows."<sup>60</sup> By implication, the foolish may very well assume infallibility; and he who knows least, does not know how little he knows. In experiments testing this phenomenon, the most incompetent people at a given task were also the most likely to vastly overestimate their competence.<sup>61</sup> This is not good news for us

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<sup>58</sup> Richard E. Petty et al., "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion: A Reply to the Michigan State Critics," *Communication Theory* 3, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>59</sup> Richard E. Petty et al., "Thought Confidence as a Determinant of Persuasion: The Self-Validation Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82, no. 5 (2002).

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin S. Catchings, ed., *Master Thoughts of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Nation Press, 1907): 31.

<sup>61</sup> Dunning, "The Dunning-Kruger Effect"; Justin Kruger and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1999).

as reasoners: if our confidence is often ill-founded, particularly when we should be least confident in our knowledge, then we may still be convinced by a specious argument even when we are processing it using the central route.

The view of the human mind provided by social psychology is vastly different from the liberal view of human capacities. The liberal view is one that believes the human mind to naturally adopt the Golden Rule: do to others as you would want them to do to you. This is a succinct and complete statement of a moral code that all reasonable minds might assent to. Psychology suggests instead a different Golden Rule: whoever has the gold, makes the rules. Our conception of justice is dependent upon what is advantageous for the social system we are a part of.<sup>62</sup> And this is not the kind of justice that liberal, rational minds would arrive at through a process of pure reason; rather, it is influenced by historical accidents like the status quo one happens to be living in. Nor are the failings of the human mind a problem limited to the uneducated or unintelligent – most biases affect us all.<sup>63</sup> Intellectual elites cannot save us, as they too have demonstrated a variety of cognitive biases in real-world situations: for instance, economists blinding themselves to ideologically-uncongenial evidence about the causes of recessions,<sup>64</sup> and international relations practitioners making disastrous foreign policy decisions.<sup>65</sup>

What brings this all into clear and unsettling focus is that while just about any media system would function fairly well for liberal, rational minds, we do not have them. We have

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<sup>62</sup> John T. Jost et al., "A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 6 (2004).

<sup>63</sup> Keith E. Stanovich and Richard F. West, "On the Relative Independence of Thinking Biases and Cognitive Ability," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>64</sup> Adam Kessler, "Cognitive Dissonance, the Global Financial Crisis and the Discipline of Economics," *Real-World Economics Review*, 54 (2010).

<sup>65</sup> Steve A. Yetiv, *National Security Through a Cockeyed Lens: How Cognitive Bias Impacts US Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2013).

human minds, which psychological research demonstrates are quite far from the liberal ideal. And our human minds are highly susceptible to effects of the media, from which we receive the lion's share of our information about the political realm. Media systems have profound and far-reaching effects on our political beliefs, and as a media system changes, so too does the level of political knowledge and political participation within a society.<sup>66</sup> Whatever sort of minds we have, the process of learning about the political realm through the media should go something like this. We select media sources, expose ourselves to the information and arguments made in them, make judgments about each bit of information or argument (and the source itself), store them in memory, and call upon our memory when asked to discuss a political topic with someone or to participate in the political process by voting or campaigning. If we had minds that fit the liberal ideal, each of these steps would be unproblematic almost no matter what sort of media system we had. However, we have human, not liberal, minds. And each step in this process of accumulating political knowledge from the media is fraught with dangers, difficulties, and problems arising from psychological biases. Hence, for democracy, the liberal ideal of government, to function in the absence of liberal minds, our media systems must be well suited to deal with our actual human minds. Just how far from the mark we are will become apparent from a look at several well-studied psychological biases.

### **iii. Belief bias**

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<sup>66</sup> Filipe R. Campante and Daniel A. Hojman, "Media and Polarization: Evidence from the Introduction of Broadcast TV in the United States," *Journal of Public Economics* 100 (2013); Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

*“We should always be disposed to believe that that which appears to us to be white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides.” - St. Ignatius of Loyola, Exercita Spiritualia*

A very basic form of cognitive bias we have is called belief bias. It makes us more likely to accept the validity of a syllogism (for instance, “all cats are mammals, and all mammals are vertebrates; therefore, all cats are vertebrates”) if it strikes us as believable at the instinctual, gut level: System 1 processing. The belief bias violates an assumption of the liberal view of the mind: that we process information logically. If the liberal view were correct, a feeling of believability should be irrelevant to our analysis of purely logical validity. Yet, countless studies have demonstrated that we are more likely to consider a syllogism as being perfectly logical if its conclusion strikes us as believable. What seems to be happening is that as our System 1 process analyzes a proposition, it renders a judgment as to its believability. For believable syllogisms, we run a positive test to confirm our original impression, and for unbelievable-seeming syllogisms, we run negative tests.<sup>67</sup> So, if confronted with a believable syllogism like the cat example above, our System 1 process would return a judgment of “yeah, that seems believable” – and then our System 2 process would run a positive test, thinking of familiar cats and determining that they are all, in fact, vertebrates. If confronted with a less-believable yet logically valid syllogism, like “no addictive things are inexpensive, and some illegal drugs are inexpensive; therefore, some illegal drugs are not addictive,” then our System 1 process returns a judgment of “wait, that seems wrong” without regard to the logical validity of the proposition. Now, our System 2

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<sup>67</sup> Karl Christoph Klauer et al., “On Belief Bias in Syllogistic Reasoning,” *Psychological Review* 107, no. 4 (2000).

process looks to run a negative test, thinking of illegal drugs that are addictive. If this test comes up with only addictive illegal drugs and none that are not addictive (marijuana, LSD), our minds tend to judge the syllogism as invalid. Yet, this is a perfectly logically-valid syllogism, and this belief bias error persists even when experimental participants are instructed to judge only the internal, logical validity of a syllogism.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, belief bias increases under time pressure, indicating that it is our unconscious System 1 processing that causes the bias.<sup>69</sup>

Belief bias seems to be another byproduct of the evolutionary design of our minds. Our minds are tasked with maintaining a large and stable set of beliefs about the world that allow us to navigate through it successfully. Belief bias saves us processing effort when confronted with arguments that seem to fit in with what we already believe – no need to reexamine our entire belief structure when presented with new information. Only when confronted with arguments that conflict with our belief structure do we have to expend more mental effort: to decide whether we need to revise our belief structure and accept the argument, or leave our belief structure unchanged and reject the argument. Given that it would take more effort to revise our belief structure to accommodate an argument that contradicts it, we subject these arguments to tougher scrutiny, running negative rather than positive (confirmatory) tests to prove it wrong.

Because belief bias is a phenomenon that involves both System 1 and System 2 processing, cognitive sophistication is capable of attenuating its effects, unlike many cognitive biases. Those who are more cognitively sophisticated (or smarter) are able to

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan St. B. T. Evans et al., "Reasoning, Decision Making and Rationality," *Cognition* 49, no. 1 (1993).

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan St. B. T. Evans and Jodie Curtis-Holmes, "Rapid Responding Increases Belief Bias: Evidence for the Dual-Process Theory of Reasoning," *Thinking & Reasoning* 11, no. 4 (2005).

give propositions more and better System 2 scrutiny, thereby overruling any belief bias produced by System 1. Also, in evaluating arguments, those who are more cognitively sophisticated demonstrate less belief bias – as do flexible, non-dogmatic thinkers. Belief bias affects all of us, but some of us can overcome this bias more easily than others. However, those of us with lower reasoning abilities, higher absolutism, and more categorical thinking are especially vulnerable.<sup>70</sup>

Also, even those of us with high cognitive ability are still subject to the “bias blind spot.”<sup>71</sup> The bias blind spot is our tendency to believe that biased thinking is more common in others than in ourselves. This hypocritical bias is present even in those with high cognitive ability – it is not something that can be avoided or eliminated by getting smarter. The bias blind spot seems to be caused by an implicit belief of ours, that if we introspect and examine our own thought processes, that we should be able to detect biases in processing. When we search and find none, we wrongly assume that we are blessed to be free of cognitive biases. The problem lies in the fact that our biases are often the product of consciously-inaccessible System 1 processing, and our search for biases is performed by System 2.

Thankfully, while belief bias is an undeniable reality, it is most pronounced in artificial laboratory situations. That is, when psychologists attempt to isolate the phenomenon of belief bias in an experiment, they succeed easily – but in more complex, real-world situations where belief bias is only one of many processes operating

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<sup>70</sup> Keith E. Stanovich and Richard F. West, "Reasoning Independently of Prior Belief and Individual Differences in Actively Open-Minded Thinking," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 89, no. 2 (1997).

<sup>71</sup> Richard F. West et al., "Cognitive Sophistication Does Not Attenuate the Bias Blind Spot," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 3 (2012).



concurrently, we seem to argue and reason fairly well.<sup>72</sup> This is particularly the case in group discussions, where other participants can help correct errors and group pressures can operate on us to reject arguments we might otherwise have accepted. More on this later.

#### **iv. Confirmation bias**

*“But it is, when not duly guarded against, an almost irresistible tendency of the human mind to become the slave of its own hypotheses; and when it has once habituated itself to reason, feel, and conceive, under certain arbitrary conditions, at length to mistake these conditions for laws of nature. Let us but be accustomed whenever we think of certain things, to figure them to ourselves as existing in one particular way, never in any other way, and we at last learn to think, or to feel as if we thought, that way the natural and the only possible way: and we feel the same sort of incapability of adapting our associations to any change in the hypothesis, which a rustic feels in conceiving that it is the earth which moves and the sun which stands still.”*

- John Stuart Mill, *Miss Martineau’s Summary of Political Economy*

♪ *The guilty don’t feel guilty, they learn not to* ♪

- NOFX, “The Irrationality of Rationality”

In 2009, Google unveiled a personalized search feature. What it does is remember one’s previous searches and which results were subsequently visited, making inferences

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<sup>72</sup> Mercier and Sperber, “Why Do Humans”; Mercier and Sperber, *The Enigma*.

about what one was originally trying to search for. These inferences are then used in future searches to tailor results to the individual. So if you searched for “sox,” the results would be split between web pages selling socks and web pages about the Chicago White Sox; and if you clicked on a web page about the baseball team, then in the future when you search for “sox” the results would be more limited to web pages about the baseball team. This caused a bit of concern in some circles, sparking worries that people may become more and more ideologically polarized: after all, once Google’s algorithm determined that you were conservative based on your past searches, during future searches about any given political issue, your search results would be more limited to conservative sources of information about it.

It probably would not have soothed anyone to learn that this form of potential bias in Google searches is already hard-wired into our minds, and affects us at all times, not only when searching the internet. It is called the confirmation bias, and it makes us seek out or interpret new evidence in such a way as to confirm what we already believe or expect.<sup>73</sup> This pervasive bias has been fleshed out in great detail by modern psychological research, but it has been noted by philosophers at least since Francis Bacon:

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects; in order that by this great and pernicious

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<sup>73</sup> Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998).

predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate. ... And such is the way of all superstitions, whether in astrology, dreams, omens, divine judgments, or the like; wherein men, having a delight in such vanities, mark the events where they are fulfilled, but where they fail, although this happened much oftener, neglect and pass them by.<sup>74</sup>

Among cognitive biases, the confirmation bias might be considered the supreme bias – to paraphrase from the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg’s description of the war crime of aggression, the confirmation bias differs only from other biases in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole. It compounds the effects of other biases, by strengthening the erroneous conclusions they draw, and protecting them from disconfirming evidence.

The confirmation bias works in a number of distinct ways.<sup>75</sup> It makes us restrict our attention to a favored hypothesis, even when there are several competing hypotheses that could account for a given phenomenon. For instance, if we hear of an attack against a ship by a country considered to be an enemy, and we believe that country to be ruled by power-mad despots, then we will likely restrict our attention to that one hypothesis: that the attack was due to that country’s crazy and dangerous leaders. A whole range of alternate hypotheses – that the torpedo was fired by accident, that the explosion on our ship was caused by faulty equipment, or that our ship fired a first shot – are ignored in favor of our preferred explanation. The confirmation bias also makes us preferentially treat evidence supporting our beliefs, and dismiss evidence that contradicts our beliefs. In the prior

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<sup>74</sup> Francis Bacon, “Novum Organum,” in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt, 24-123 (New York: Random House, 1939): 36.

<sup>75</sup> Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias.”

example, we may give great weight to evidence of the enemy country's aggressive militaristic tendencies, and be dismissive of equally relevant evidence that stormy conditions may have led to an accidental firing, or evidence of a history of dangerous mechanical problems on our ship, or reports from nearby vessels that our ship fired first. The confirmation bias also leads us to look primarily for evidence that supports our beliefs (even when we do not care deeply about those beliefs). So if we happen to believe that our ship was attacked by an enemy country because it is ruled by psychopaths, then we will tend to search for confirmatory evidence of this belief, rather than for all the available evidence. The confirmation bias also makes us overweight incidents that confirm our beliefs, and give less weight to incidents that disconfirm our hypothesis. We may need to read only one instance of the enemy country's leadership behaving in a crazy and violent manner to confirm our belief, while several accounts from different reliable sources that the ship explosion was due to mechanical failure are likely to be insufficient to make us change our minds. The confirmation bias makes us see only what we are looking for: if we were to read a book on the enemy country's history, we may very easily find evidence of its belligerence in every war the country has ever fought – yet be completely blind to the fact that almost all of these wars were started by other countries. This can cause an illusion of consistency: a country believed to be peaceful will be misjudged to be *consistently* peaceful, and a country believed to be belligerent will be misjudged as *consistently* belligerent. Not only does the confirmation bias infect our searches for new information, but it also affects the process of searching our own memory.<sup>76</sup> What is worse, this biased search of our memory is perceived by us to be objective and thorough, creating an illusion of objectivity –

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<sup>76</sup> Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 483.

we have no conscious awareness that our memory search is biased in the direction of confirming our beliefs. Therefore, even if we have examined plenty of evidence supporting alternate explanations of the explosion on our ship, later on when we are discussing the issue and are examining our memory for the evidence we know about it, our very memory search is biased as well.

Far from being a problem that affects only the poorly educated, the confirmation bias is present even in science: precisely the area in which bias is most painstakingly avoided. In experiments testing whether the confirmation bias affects scientists in their judgments of scientific studies, participants were given research articles to judge.<sup>77</sup> Some of them were in accord with the scientists' prior beliefs, and others were contrary to them. As predicted, the scientists judged the studies that were inconsistent with their beliefs more harshly than similarly-designed studies that were consistent with their beliefs – and this was so even though the scientists were aware of and tried to apply the normative value of impartiality. While the scientists' criticisms of the studies that challenged their views were ostensibly based on methodological grounds, the inconsistency with which they applied methodological standards made clear that it was the conclusions of the studies rather than their methods that made the scientists so critical of them.<sup>78</sup> In fact, this sort of cognitive bias may be *more* prevalent among those higher in cognitive reflection and numeracy.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jonathan J. Koehler, "The Influence of Prior Beliefs on Scientific Judgments of Evidence Quality," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 56, no. 1 (1993). Non-scientists reviewing scientific studies evince the same bias (Kunda, 1990, 489-490).

<sup>78</sup> Similarly, "motivated skepticism" in the evaluation of scientific evidence by political partisans seems to be driven by aversion to the *solutions* proposed for the problems: for conservatives, government intervention to solve climate change, and for liberals, gun rights to prevent violent crime (Campbell and Kay, 2014). In another study, reading ideologically-discordant scientific reports led both liberals and conservatives to distrust the scientific community more (Nisbet et al., 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Dan M. Kahan, "Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection: An Experimental Study," *Judgment and Decision Making* 8 (2012); Dan M. Kahan et al., "Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government," *Yale Law School, Public Law Working Paper* 307 (2013).

However, there is some evidence that forms of specialized training can reduce the effects of biased reasoning.<sup>80</sup>

The confirmation bias can be said to cause “belief persistence,” the phenomenon that once a belief or opinion has taken root in our minds, it can demonstrate tough resistance to change – even when we are exposed to otherwise compelling evidence that it is wrong.<sup>81</sup> And belief persistence can be seen throughout society, from politics to economics to science: “[o]ne can see a confirmation bias both in the difficulty with which new ideas break through opposing established points of view and in the uncritical allegiance they are often given once they have become part of the established view themselves.”<sup>82</sup> Here is the root of what is called the Planck Principle: when physicist Max Planck met resistance from older physicists against his (correct) theories, he proposed that scientific advances occur not by established scientists being convinced of superior, new theories, but by older scientists dying and being replaced by younger scientists who adhere to the new theories.

Whether called confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, or myside bias, experimental results are clear that we are skewed in the direction of our prior opinions when we evaluate and generate evidence and test hypotheses.<sup>83</sup> One interesting study attempted to find out what people think about biased argumentation itself.<sup>84</sup> Participants

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<sup>80</sup> Peter Beattie and Glenn Adams, “Motivated Knowledge in International Relations” (unpublished manuscript, May 29, 2016), Microsoft Word file; Dan M. Kahan et al., “‘Ideology’ or ‘Situation Sense’? An Experimental Investigation of Motivated Reasoning and Professional Judgment,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 164, no. 2 (2016). However, judges have been found susceptible to in-group bias in free speech cases (Epstein et al., 2013), and statistical experts have been found to commit the conjunction fallacy (Tversky and Kahneman, 1983, 297-298).

<sup>81</sup> Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias,” 187-188.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>83</sup> Keith E. Stanovich et al., “Myside Bias, Rational Thinking, and Intelligence,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 4 (2013).

<sup>84</sup> Jonathan B. Baron, “Myside Bias in Thinking about Abortion,” *Thinking & Reasoning* 1, no. 3 (1995).

were exposed to strong arguments on abortion, some of which were entirely one-sided, and others which presented two sides of the issue. Interestingly, participants rated the one-sided arguments as superior to the two-sided arguments – not only in terms of the quality of the arguments themselves, but in terms of how helpful they would be in forming one’s own opinion. Education may attenuate this effect, if we are taught to actively pursue multiple perspectives on issues and value reasoning that incorporates multiple perspectives.<sup>85</sup> This is needs to be a key goal in education, because otherwise the effects of this bias on the public sphere may be dire indeed; especially when the media provide no shortage of single-minded, opinionated pundits vociferously arguing one side of issues.

The confirmation bias does not require any conscious or subconscious motivation to warp our information-seeking and -processing in the direction of what we already believe. It can be explained entirely in terms of System 1 and 2 processes, and the selective quantity of thought we apply to a given issue.<sup>86</sup> Put simply, when we encounter information that is consistent with our beliefs, our System 1 gives it a thumbs up, we get a good feeling about it, and we do not subject it to much System 2 scrutiny (for instance, considering alternate explanations). However, when we encounter belief-inconsistent, disconfirming evidence, our System 1 raises a red flag, and System 2 kicks in to scrutinize the evidence, running it through a fine-toothed comb. Therefore, the confirmation bias or motivated reasoning can persist without any conscious or subconscious desire to cherry-pick evidence or construct tortured justifications for our beliefs. It can persist in a simple process of subjecting belief-

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<sup>85</sup> Baron, “Myside,” 233; Maggie E. Toplak and Keith E. Stanovich, “Associations Between Myside Bias on an Informal Reasoning Task and Amount of Post-Secondary Education,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 17, no. 7 (2003).

<sup>86</sup> Peter H. Ditto, “Passion, Reason, and Necessity: A Quantity-of-Processing View of Motivated Reasoning,” in *Delusion and Self-Deception: Affective and Motivational Influences on Belief Formation*, ed. Tim Bayne and Jordi Fernández, 23-54 (New York: Psychology Press, 2008).

inconsistent evidence to a thorough, critical System 2 vetting, while evidence that confirms already-held beliefs simply slips through without much thought.

This is consistent with a less “psychological,” more subjective or commonsense view of the phenomenon:

[A]n interpretation makes sense of part of the world’s blooming, buzzing overabundance of information. But in so doing it tends to screen in a biased and self-confirming sample of information: information that is consistent with the interpretation. Other information will tend to be screened out as irrelevant, incomprehensible, absurd, or suspect. Thus, the process of interpretation-based learning should, *ceteris paribus*, initiate a spiral of confirmation bias, i.e., a “spiral of conviction,” that progressively strengthens the conviction that one’s interpretation is correct.<sup>87</sup>

This is also consistent with network models of attitude change and formation, which picture ideas as embedded in networks of schemas in the brain.<sup>88</sup> These models also explain phenomena like confirmation bias, cognitive dissonance reduction, and system justification tendency without positing subconscious motivations, but rather as the structural effect of neural networks operating under a consistency constraint: the links between ideas cannot be contradictory.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Friedman, *No Exit*, 234.

<sup>88</sup> Brian M. Monroe and Stephen J. Read, “A General Connectionist Model of Attitude Structure and Change: The ACS (Attitudes as Constraint Satisfaction) Model,” *Psychological Review* 115, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>89</sup> See the discussion of linear thinking below; systematic thinking may be an exception, the result of education or life experiences that allow for the formation of contradictory connections between ideas. For instance: viewing democracy as both good and bad, according to its various facets and implementations.



Thankfully, the confirmation bias is not all-powerful. Although we certainly are selective with the evidence we search for, we unfairly under-weigh the value of contrary evidence versus supporting evidence, and we remember confirmatory evidence better than disconfirming evidence, we cannot, however, completely ignore disconfirming evidence once we become aware of it.<sup>90</sup> While we are motivated to argue against disconfirming evidence at first, as it builds up we become more anxious, leading to a tipping point at which we may revise our opinion, reducing anxiety.<sup>91</sup> The problem lies in the low likelihood that we will encounter such “knowledge constraints” in the first place, if we tend to accumulate only such knowledge that fits with our preexisting beliefs.

#### **v. Cognitive dissonance reduction**

*“The lust for comfort; that stealthy thing that enters the house as a guest, and then becomes a host, and then a master.”*

- Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, “On Houses”

*“Faced with the choice between changing one’s mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.”*

- John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics, Peace and Laughter*

Cognitive dissonance is a phenomenon uncovered over half a century ago.<sup>92</sup> It describes the unpleasant feeling we experience when we encounter evidence that conflicts with our beliefs. These beliefs can include knowledge or opinions about the outside world,

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<sup>90</sup> Kunda, “The Case,” 493.

<sup>91</sup> David P. Redlawsk et al., “The Affective Tipping Point: Do Motivated Reasoners Ever “Get It?”” *Political Psychology* 31, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>92</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston IL: Row Peterson, 1957).

the social environment, and one's self or behavior. When we encounter such evidence, and feel the unpleasantness of cognitive dissonance, we are drawn to reduce it. This can be done in a number of ways: we can reject the veracity of the new evidence, ignore it, reinterpret it so as to make it consonant with our prior beliefs, or, the least likely option, change our prior beliefs to make them consistent with the new evidence.

Doubtless it was cognitive dissonance that struck each of the passers-by in the biblical parable on the road to Jericho as they walked by the wounded traveler. The priest and the Levite must have felt that their disregard of the wounded traveler as they passed him by was inconsistent with their views of themselves as good, caring people. Perhaps they explained away their cognitive dissonance by reminding themselves that they were late for something important and that someone else would surely help. Or, they might have imagined that the wounded traveler could have been a robber in disguise, attempting to set a trap; and while they were of course good people, they were not stupid and would not put themselves at risk of falling into a trap set by brigands preying on people's good nature. Perhaps they even felt some moral indignation at the Roman authorities for not solving the crime problem, forcing good people like themselves to face such uncomfortable dilemmas. Only the Good Samaritan reduced his cognitive dissonance by eliminating its source: helping the wounded traveler, and bringing his actions in line with his view of himself as a good person.

We do not often select this option. In an experiment of students at Princeton Theological Seminary, a shabbily-dressed confederate was positioned, slumped-over in

apparent distress, along the path the students had to take to deliver a talk.<sup>93</sup> The experimenters found that the only variable that made a difference in whether or not the students stopped to help the man was the amount of time pressure they were under – even when the student’s talk *was on the Good Samaritan story*, that made no difference in the likelihood of stopping to help.

The interesting thing about cognitive dissonance and cognitive dissonance reduction is that it does not always flow from belief to behavior that is inconsistent with the belief. It can flow in the opposite direction too. In one study, participants were asked to read aloud a sheet of disparaging lawyer jokes.<sup>94</sup> Half of the participants were told that reading the jokes was optional, and half of the participants were told it was a requirement. After reading the disparaging lawyer jokes aloud, the participants who were given a choice reported having a lower opinion of lawyers than the participants who were required to read the jokes. Cognitive dissonance reduction was set in motion first by behavior: choosing to read the lawyer jokes aloud. With this information in mind, when the participants who had been given a choice were later asked for their opinion about lawyers, they avoided cognitive dissonance by lowering their opinion of the profession. The participants who were simply required to read the jokes reported having higher opinions of lawyers: after all, they had been *required* to read the anti-lawyer jokes, they had not chosen to do so. In their minds, reading anti-lawyer jokes was not inconsistent with holding generally positive views of lawyers – it was not something they freely chose to do. Not so for those given a choice: they had to revise their opinions of lawyer downward to achieve

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<sup>93</sup> John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (1973).

<sup>94</sup> Karen L. Hobden and James M. Olson, "From Jest to Antipathy: Disparagement Humor as a Source of Dissonance-Motivated Attitude Change," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1994).

cognitive consistency, and reduce the cognitive dissonance arising from their anti-lawyer behavior (reading the jokes aloud) conflicting with their generally favorable view of lawyers.

Cognitive dissonance reduction is such a widespread phenomenon due to the strength of our desire for cognitive consistency.<sup>95</sup> We want to believe that our beliefs about ourselves and the world are consistent, not contradictory, and that our behavior is in line with our beliefs. We do not want to be hypocrites. However, this does not mean that cognitive dissonance reduction is the result of a consciously chosen strategy; we are blissfully ignorant of it when it is operating. Cognitive dissonance reduction may be the accidental outcome of an unconscious epistemic process aimed at maintaining cognitive consistency. Overall, we want to believe that desired beliefs are true, and undesired beliefs are false; and if we encounter inconsistent evidence, it creates cognitive dissonance over the apparent error in our overall belief system. The process of cognitive dissonance reduction then kicks in to smooth out the apparent error.

For instance, if we believe ourselves to be intelligent, and we receive a negative judgment on our intelligence, we may attempt to resolve the inconsistency by looking for information that questions the validity of the negative judgment. We do not engage in this unconscious process when we receive a judgment that is in accord with our beliefs, whether it is negative or positive. This process has also been used to explain prejudice, our tendency to judge people on their intrinsic qualities while ignoring situational influences, and the strength of our first impressions of people.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bertram Gawronski, "Back to the Future of Dissonance Theory: Cognitive Consistency as a Core Motive," *Social Cognition* 30, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>96</sup> Gawronski, "Back to the Future," 662-663.

Cognitive dissonance reduction manifests itself in myriad ways, quite often strange. In one experiment, participants were instructed to deliver electric shocks to “victims,” who would either be given the chance to retaliate or not.<sup>97</sup> Participants were given the opportunity to insult and derogate the victims, and the amount of derogation was measured across retaliation and non-retaliation conditions. What the researchers found is that participants who did not expect their victims to retaliate derogated the victims more than participants who did expect their victims to retaliate. In the minds of the participants, shocking a victim who could not retaliate created an inequity in their relationship. This caused uncomfortable cognitive dissonance, and to reduce it, the participants sought to justify their act by derogating the victim (as if they *must have* deserved it because they had some negative quality). Those who expected their victims to retaliate experienced no such cognitive dissonance, because they expected the inequity in their relationship to be soon eliminated (by the victim delivering electric shocks to them in retaliation). These participants derogated their victims less.

Ironically, only psychopaths may be immune from cognitive dissonance reduction.<sup>98</sup> In cases where behavior toward another person is inconsistent with the norms of empathy and honesty, psychopaths demonstrate no unpleasant cognitive dissonance needing to be reduced. For the rest of us, however, cognitive dissonance reduction is a pervasive phenomenon.

The problem with cognitive dissonance reduction for the liberal ideal of the human mind is not that cognitive dissonance is felt to be uncomfortable, and avoided. Avoiding

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<sup>97</sup> Ellen Berscheid et al., "Retaliation as a Means of Restoring Equity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 10, no. 4 (1968).

<sup>98</sup> Ashley A. Murray et al., "Psychopathic Personality Traits and Cognitive Dissonance: Individual Differences in Attitude Change," *Journal of Research in Personality* 46, no. 5 (2012).

inconsistency is certainly a good design feature for a rational mind. The problem lies in *how* cognitive dissonance is reduced: oftentimes, it is just plain stupid. There can be no rational defense of derogating innocent victims as a way to eliminate cognitive dissonance arising from an initial, unprovoked attack. So too with the hypothetical ways in which the priest and Levite reduced their cognitive dissonance: instead of making up specious justifications and rationalizations, they should have owned up to the fact that they were hypocrites, or revised their self-images to include the fact that they are the type of person to pass by a wounded stranger in need of their help. Or, ideally, they should have chosen not to embrace a “hypocrite” or “heartless” self-image, and instead made their behavior uphold their principles – or in the case of the divinity students, made their behavior match the moral of the very story they were rushing off to give a talk about.

Cognitive dissonance reduction poses a grave problem to democratic politics in the context of our present media systems. If a positive self-image and group-image (whether that group is our country, ethnicity, etc.) is strong enough to provoke cognitive dissonance-reducing rationalizations and justifications, but not strong enough to shape behavior and beliefs in such a way as to eliminate the need for cognitive dissonance reduction in the first place, then we are in danger of being constant hypocrites. If we learn about an action our country has taken against another country which conflicts with our values and our image of our country as basically good, instead of attempting to change our country’s actions, we are more likely to take the less demanding route of accepting whichever specious justification or rationalization we encounter. Thus, flimsy justifications for war can be readily, even eagerly accepted. Outside perspectives that rail against a war and its rationalizations can be easily dismissed – they would, after all, only provoke more uncomfortable cognitive

dissonance. And the worst part of it all is that we are forever unaware of this process. To us, we are simply paragons of reason and rationality, choosing the most accurate beliefs, opinions, and facts from among those we are exposed to.

#### **vi. Meaning maintenance – accounting for a bevy of biases**

*“[T]he punishment of every disordered mind is its own disorder.” – Augustine, Confessions, Book 1*

Our minds get stranger yet, and further away from the liberal, rational ideal. A recent theory with solid evidentiary support suggests that *all* experiences that violate expected relationships between people or things cause biologically-based, aversive arousal; this in turn sets in motion compensatory efforts to eliminate the aversive arousal; and, most unexpectedly, these compensatory efforts may have absolutely nothing to do with the experience that set the process in motion.<sup>99</sup> “Expected relationships,” in this theory, are at the core of what *meaning* means for us. The meaning of “snow” involves an expected relationship with cold; the meaning of “kindness” involves expected relationships between people that are friendly and helpful; the meaning of “enemy” involves expected relationships with danger, harm, and potential violence, and so on. When an expected relationship is violated – say, by noticing that our behavior violates an expected relationship between ourselves and the ideal of a good person – an unconscious feeling of anxious arousal sets in. Although we do not subjectively experience or feel it, the anxious

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<sup>99</sup> Travis Proulx and Steven J. Heine, “Death and Black Diamonds: Meaning, Mortality, and the Meaning Maintenance Model,” *Psychological Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (2006); Travis Proulx and Michael Inzlicht, “The Five ‘A’s of Meaning Maintenance: Finding Meaning in the Theories of Sense-Making,” *Psychological Inquiry* 23, no. 4 (2012).

arousal begins with a release of epinephrine (adrenaline) and often cortisol (another stress hormone), and continues with increased skin conductance, constriction of blood vessels, and variability in cardiac activity. This anxious arousal is described as a “physiological threat response,” as if a violation of expected relationships is perceived by our minds as an actual physical threat. In one experiment on cognitive dissonance, some participants were given a placebo pill they were told would reduce anxiety – and it was these participants who displayed no cognitive dissonance reduction.<sup>100</sup> Cognitive dissonance reduction is only performed in order to reduce anxious arousal, and these participants believed that a pill had already taken care of that.

This sort of anxious arousal may seem to make sense for encountering information that profoundly challenges our worldviews: for instance, if we discover that the government we had supported and believed to be honest and good was in fact utterly corrupt. But it seems that just about any violation of expected relationships will do, including interacting with an Asian American with a southern U.S. accent;<sup>101</sup> making facial expressions that conflict with the emotions actually being experienced;<sup>102</sup> or being a minority group member who expects others to be prejudiced, and then interacting with someone who is not prejudiced.<sup>103</sup> The “meaning maintenance” phenomenon could arise

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<sup>100</sup> Mark P. Zanna and Joel Cooper, "Dissonance and the Pill: An Attribution Approach to Studying the Arousal Properties of Dissonance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29, no. 5 (1974).

<sup>101</sup> Wendy Berry Mendes et al., "Threatened by the Unexpected: Physiological Responses During Social Interactions with Expectancy-Violating Partners," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>102</sup> Jennifer L. Robinson and Heath A. Demaree, "Physiological and Cognitive Effects of Expressive Dissonance," *Brain and Cognition* 63, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>103</sup> Sarah S.M. Townsend et al., "Can the Absence of Prejudice Be More Threatening Than Its Presence? It Depends on One's Worldview," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 6 (2010).



from “crossed wires” in our brains, with anxiety aroused by one piece of information being subdued by the processing of an unrelated, soothing piece of information.<sup>104</sup>

We have five possible strategies – all performed outside of conscious awareness – to reduce this feeling of anxious arousal that occurs when we encounter a violation of expected relationships.<sup>105</sup> First, we can assimilate a discordant piece of evidence by modifying it to fit with our beliefs. Second, we can accommodate our beliefs to the discordant evidence. These two are fairly straightforward. Third, we can use abstraction to compensate for a violation of expected relationships by *creating* a new, unviolated relationship from our environment. For instance, when subliminally presented with nonsense word pairs, participants were better able to detect patterns in strings of letters;<sup>106</sup> and when made to feel that they lacked control, participants were more likely to see patterns in events, including by creating conspiracy theories.<sup>107</sup> Fourth, we can use assembly or meaning-making, essentially creating a new framework to make sense of a violation of expected relationships, thereby eliminating the violation. However, this creative process does not need to be directly related to the meaning violation that gave rise to it; in fact, during periods of cultural upheaval or personal uncertainty, meaning violations may give rise to enhanced artistic output.<sup>108</sup> (This is related to the underlying rationale for art therapy: using creativity to make up for unrelated sources of acute personal distress.) A fifth way, affirmation, seems absolutely irrational: when faced with

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<sup>104</sup> Colin Holbrook, "Branches of a Twisting Tree: Domain-Specific Threat Psychologies Derive from Shared Mechanisms," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 7 (2016).

<sup>105</sup> Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five."

<sup>106</sup> Daniel Randles et al., "Turn-Frogs and Careful-Sweaters: Non-Conscious Perception of Incongruous Word Pairings Provokes Fluid Compensation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>107</sup> Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception," *Science* 322, no. 5898 (2008).

<sup>108</sup> Proulx and Inzlicht, "The Five," 328-329.

experiences or evidence which violate expected relationships, we reduce anxious arousal by affirming familiar values and beliefs, *even when these affirmed beliefs have absolutely nothing to do with the violation*. For instance, being reminded of one's mortality led municipal court judges to affirm their moral beliefs by setting a significantly higher bond on women facing prostitution charges,<sup>109</sup> and hearing an absurd joke or being subliminally presented with nonsense word pairs made experimental participants affirm their moral beliefs by expressing a desire to punish criminals more harshly.<sup>110</sup>

While this meaning maintenance framework helps to explain why some people turn to religion in times of distress, or why whole societies may support conservative policies after experiencing some national trauma, it stands in diametric opposition to the liberal ideal of a rational mind. The liberal vision of the rational minds that would comprise a healthy democracy could hardly have imagined that reading nonsense word pairs would make us punish criminals more harshly. The experiments that have been done in this area have largely concerned topics of minor interest to politics, but there is little reason to doubt that the same phenomenon is at work in our thinking about political issues. As the late comedian Bill Hicks once joked:

People say to me, 'Hey, Bill, the [Gulf] war made us feel better about ourselves.'

Really? What kind of people are these with such low self-esteem that they need a

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<sup>109</sup> Abram Rosenblatt et al., "Evidence for Terror Management Theory: I. The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Violate or Uphold Cultural Values," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 4 (1989): 682-683.

<sup>110</sup> Travis Proulx et al., "When Is the Unfamiliar the Uncanny? Meaning Affirmation after Exposure to Absurdist Literature, Humor, and Art," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2010).

war to feel better about themselves? I saw them on the news, waving their flags.

May I suggest, instead of a war to feel better about yourself, perhaps ... sit-ups?<sup>111</sup>

The answer to Hicks' "what kind of people" question may simply be: human people. If any violation of expected relationships makes us anxious, and we can soothe our anxiety by punishing criminals more harshly – then why might not even the organized mass murder of war function as a way to make us feel better?

### **vii. Groupishness and bias**

*"What should one write to ruin an adversary? The best thing is to prove that he is not one of us – the stranger, alien, foreigner. To this end we create the category of the true family. We here, you and I, the authorities, are a true family. We live in unity, among our own kind. We have the same roof over our heads, we sit at the same table, we know how to get along with each other, how to help each other out. Unfortunately, we are not alone."*

- Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Shah of Shahs*

*"To be a good patriot is to wish that one's city may be enriched by trade, and be powerful by arms. It is clear that one country cannot gain without another's losing, and that one cannot conquer without bringing misery to another. Such then is the human state, that to wish greatness for one's country is to wish harm to one's neighbors. He who wished that his fatherland might never be greater, smaller, richer, or poorer, would be a citizen of the world."*

- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "Fatherland"

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<sup>111</sup> Bill Hicks, "Chicago (1991) [Bootleg]," YouTube Video, 21:10, from an untelevised performance, posted by AMP3183 (November 29, 2014).

“Groupishness” is a neologism created by psychologists studying group dynamics. Basically, it refers to the shocking ease with which we humans create and sort ourselves into groups, and then act in a discriminatory fashion toward other groups. It does not take much: creating the most arbitrary of distinctions between strangers, and dividing them into groups on the basis of these arbitrary distinctions, will suffice.<sup>112</sup> Just about any distinction imaginable, from eye color to shirt color, can be used to form groups – and these newly formed groups will then behave in a discriminatory manner toward each other. The mere use of words like “us” and “them” prime our groupish instincts, and subtly influences the way we judge unknown others (favorably with the use of “us,” unfavorably with the use of “them”).<sup>113</sup> Even using a noun instead of an adjective to describe someone’s nationality (e.g., “Pole” vs. “Polish”) makes a difference: in-group bias is more sensitive to nouns.<sup>114</sup> For better or worse, we are a deeply groupish species.

Intergroup bias is a term that describes our systematic tendency to judge fellow members of our group (an in-group) more favorably than members of groups we are not members of (out-groups). This bias can include discriminatory behaviors, prejudicial attitudes, and stereotyping.<sup>115</sup> We even apply different standards of justice: more allowing for “us,” more exacting for “them.”<sup>116</sup> We are positively biased toward our in-groups, and

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<sup>112</sup> Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination," *Scientific American* 223, no. 5 (1970).

<sup>113</sup> Charles W. Perdue et al., "Us and Them: Social Categorization and the Process of Intergroup Bias," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 3 (1990): 482; John F. Dovidio Samuel L. Gaertner, "Stereotypes and Evaluative Intergroup Bias," in *Affect, Cognition and Stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception*, ed. Diane M. Mackie and David L. Hamilton, 167-193 (San Diego: Academic Press, 1993): 176-179.

<sup>114</sup> Sylvie Graf et al., "Nouns Cut Slices: Effects of Linguistic Forms on Intergroup Bias," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>115</sup> Miles Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Bias," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>116</sup> Anca M. Miron, et al., "Motivated Shifting of Justice Standards," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 6 (2010).

this bias arises automatically and outside of consciousness. Likewise, on an unconscious level we are negatively biased against out-groups – though negative out-group bias is generally weaker than positive in-group bias.<sup>117</sup> However, once out-groups begin to act, intergroup bias can initiate a bevy of negative reactions. Out-groups violating our in-group norms can make us disgusted and want to avoid them; out-groups believed to be benefiting unjustly from a resource can elicit resentment and provoke actions to cut them off from that resource; and out-groups that we view as threatening can make us feel afraid and prompt us to take hostile, even violent, action.<sup>118</sup>

The intergroup bias is so pervasive that it extends to and biases even our use of language.<sup>119</sup> When describing positive in-group behaviors and negative out-group behaviors, we are more likely to use expressive verbs (called interpretive action verbs) and highly abstract terms – linguistic devices that subtly suggest that good things done by our in-group and bad things done by an out-group are general and widespread. On the other hand, we are more likely to use highly concrete terms (descriptive action verbs) to describe positive out-group and negative in-group behaviors. In this way, when we communicate we subtly suggest that bad things done by our in-group and good things done by an out-group are individual exceptions and outliers, not generalizable to the group as a whole. And these distinctions make a difference: reading newspaper articles with out-group linguistic bias subtly increases our prejudice against the groups described.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Diane M. Mackie and Eliot R. Smith, "Intergroup Relations: Insights from a Theoretically Integrative Approach," *Psychological Review* 105, no. 3 (1998).

<sup>118</sup> Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Bias," 585-587.

<sup>119</sup> Luigi Anolli et al., "Linguistic Intergroup Bias in Political Communication," *The Journal of General Psychology* 133, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>120</sup> Daniel Geschke et al., "Effects of Linguistic Abstractness in the Mass Media," *Journal of Media Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2010).

As anyone who has ever attended a football match or a patriotic rally can attest, intergroup bias can have positive as well as negative effects. Intergroup bias can enhance self-esteem, as the positive affect and pride we feel being a member of a relatively high-status or successful group can rub off on ourselves individually. Also, members of high-status groups may demonstrate magnanimity to lower-status out-groups when the gap separating them is wide – and they tend not to demonstrate bias on dimensions of their group that are irrelevant to their high status.<sup>121</sup> So, members of a rich and powerful in-group may be quite kind to members of poor and powerless out-groups. Also, the members of a rich and powerful national in-group are unlikely to be biased against national out-groups that are better than them only in cricket or musical creativity.

However, the dark side of intergroup bias looms far larger. While intergroup bias might at first be viewed as only a mild negative since it seems to mostly cause group enhancement, once groups enter into perceived competition group enhancement turns to group defense, and intergroup relations deteriorate.<sup>122</sup> In fact, intergroup bias is greatly attuned to situational variables. Believing in the superiority of one's own national in-group is correlated with prejudice against ethnic minority out-groups.<sup>123</sup> Minority groups with high power display particularly strong discrimination against out-groups, and high-power groups along with equal-power groups demonstrate greater bias than groups with little power.<sup>124</sup> High-power groups are more prone to underestimate commonalities and to

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<sup>121</sup> Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Bias," 585.

<sup>122</sup> Mackie and Smith, "Intergroup Relations," 509-510.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 511; Rui J.P. De Figueiredo and Zachary Elkins, "Are Patriots Bigots? An Inquiry into the Vices of In-Group Pride," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>124</sup> Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Bias," 585.

polarize the difference between themselves and low-power groups.<sup>125</sup> Within countries, economic problems and a high percentage of immigrant out-group members exacerbates intergroup bias, in particular prejudice on the part of the dominant in-group.<sup>126</sup> Intergroup bias can cause in-group favoritism in the allocation of benefits, and both negative and positive forms of in-group bias are aggravated by conditions like inferior status and social instability.<sup>127</sup> When reading newspaper stories of violent acts committed by members of our in-group, we are more likely to attribute them to situational factors (for instance, poverty or political oppression); but when we read about violent acts committed by members of out-groups, we are more likely to attribute them to dispositional factors, like an intrinsically violent character or culture.<sup>128</sup> This particular aspect of intergroup bias helps to prop up an inequitable status quo: members of high-status in-groups will attribute the condition of low-status, low-power out-groups to their personal inadequacies, while ignoring social, environmental, and situational constraints on their ability to succeed in society.<sup>129</sup>

Similarly disturbing, intergroup bias causes us to judge out-groups as more homogenous than in-groups – and this effect is found with both real-world and experimental groups.<sup>130</sup> Compounding this problem, specific encounters with out-groups

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<sup>125</sup> Dacher Keltner and Robert J. Robinson, "Defending the Status Quo: Power and Bias in Social Conflict," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 10 (1997).

<sup>126</sup> Lincoln Quillian, "Prejudice as a Response to Perceived Group Threat: Population Composition and Anti-Immigrant and Racial Prejudice in Europe," *American Sociological Review* (1995).

<sup>127</sup> Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Bias," 587.

<sup>128</sup> Amarina Ariyanto et al., "Intergroup Attribution Bias in the Context of Extreme Intergroup Conflict," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2009); Pamela Johnston Conover, "The Role of Social Groups in Political Thinking," *British Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (1988).

<sup>129</sup> Patricia Gurin et al., "Stratum Identification and Consciousness," *Social Psychology Quarterly* (1980): 46.

<sup>130</sup> Olivier Klein and Mark Snyder, "Stereotypes and Behavioral Confirmation: From Interpersonal to Intergroup Perspectives," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 35 (2003); , David M. Messick and Diane M. Mackie, "Intergroup Relations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 40 (1989): 55-57.

strongly affect our judgments of the group overall; worse yet, encounters with *a single member* of an out-group can influence our impression of the entire group.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, mere geographical distance between ourselves and a behavior makes the behavior itself seem like it is due to a person's intrinsic disposition or nature, rather than as the result of situational and environmental factors.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, if we have a bad experience while traveling in a foreign country, a bad experience with one person from that country, or see a news story about a threatening behavior by a person from that country, then our perception of that entire country – comprising several, maybe hundreds of millions of people – can be powerfully and negatively influenced.

Stereotypes are an influential byproduct of intergroup bias, produced by the mechanisms described above. Interestingly, stereotypes have a way of perpetuating themselves not only by biased processing on the part of the stereotype holders, but by the very behavior of the stereotyped themselves.<sup>133</sup> Behavioral confirmation of stereotypes occurs in cases when a powerful group has stereotyped a low-power group. In order to “get along” with the powerful group, members of the low-power group are likely to unconsciously follow a strategy of not causing the powerful group any confusion, by displaying stereotypical behavior themselves. This behavioral confirmation effect has been noted in experimental studies organized around “getting acquainted” and cooperative task scenarios. When stigmatized and nonstigmatized groups are combined in such experiments, nonstigmatized group members display dominant behaviors and stigmatized

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<sup>131</sup> Eaaron I. Henderson-King and Richard E. Nisbett, "Anti-Black Prejudice as a Function of Exposure to the Negative Behavior of a Single Black Person," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>132</sup> Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, "Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance," *Psychological Review* 117, no. 2 (2010): 448.

<sup>133</sup> Klein and Snyder, "Stereotypes," 163-172.



groups display avoidant behaviors, both of which help to perpetuate the stereotypes purportedly describing the two groups. For instance, if a stigmatized group member perceives prejudice, the person is likely to react with an avoidant style of interaction; this avoidance is then interpreted in such a way as to confirm the negative stereotypes held by nonstigmatized group members (“this person is so hostile, just as I expected from a member of that group”). Mere anxiety caused by contact with out-group members can increase stereotyping, as anxiety inhibits our ability to concentrate on individuating information about an out-group member that might weigh against a stereotype. Anxiety on the part of an out-group member can cause them to adopt avoidant behaviors, which then are interpreted by in-group members as confirmation of their stereotypes (as in, “I *knew* those people were unsociable and hostile – they clearly don’t want to be friendly with me”). In this way, stereotypes create their own justification and support by eliciting the very behaviors hypothesized by the stereotype itself. Even when behavioral confirmation does not occur, and a stereotyped out-group member behaves in a way contrary to the stereotype, we are more likely to remember stereotype-consistent than -inconsistent behaviors. This makes us less likely to abandon stereotypes we hold, even when confronted with disconfirming evidence.

The stereotypes produced by intergroup bias can not only affect behavior, but even performance on real-world tasks. For instance, when women are subtly reminded of the cultural stereotype that men are superior in math, they perform less well on math tests than when they are not primed with a reminder of the stereotype.<sup>134</sup> This phenomenon is

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<sup>134</sup> Claude M. Steele, “A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance,” *American Psychologist* 52, no. 6 (1997).

called stereotype threat, and seemingly applies to every conceivable area in which a well-known stereotype exists: simply reminding us of a stereotype that supposedly describes our in-group can powerfully influence us to perform in line with that stereotype. For instance, female students with advanced math skills performed worse than men on math tests after being primed to think of their gender, poor students did worse than rich students on a test after being reminded of their socioeconomic status,<sup>135</sup> and Black and White athletes performed worse at an athletic task after being told the task would be diagnostic of “sports intelligence” or “natural athletic ability,” respectively.<sup>136</sup>

It is crucial to remember that in talking about intergroup bias, we are referring to *unconscious* processes. We are all familiar enough with demagogues who openly appeal to in-group membership to denigrate or even attack out-group members. But this is an overt, conscious phenomenon. What social psychologists study regarding intergroup bias are unconscious processes that bias our thinking in ways we are not aware of. Especially among the U.S. college student population that makes up the majority of samples, overt and openly-expressed biased attitudes are rare. Yet in experimental studies, the prevalence of intergroup bias powerfully suggests the presence of processes operating behind the scenes of conscious awareness. While nationalist or racist demagogues may openly and consciously express ideas that boost their in-group and derogate out-groups, the process by which they arrived at those ideas was powerfully influenced by *unconscious* intergroup bias.

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<sup>135</sup> Bettina Spencer and Emanuele Castano, "Social Class is Dead. Long Live Social Class! Stereotype Threat among Low Socioeconomic Status Individuals," *Social Justice Research* 20, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>136</sup> Jeff Stone et al., "Stereotype Threat Effects on Black and White Athletic Performance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1999).

It may be tempting, in order to protect our rosy pictures of ourselves and our minds, to suppose that the experimental evidence demonstrating the existence of intergroup bias and behavioral confirmation is of limited applicability. After all, these experimentally-created situations are very simple, and the real world is quite complex. Yet it is precisely the simplicity of the “minimal group paradigm” in intergroup bias research that is its strength. If such tiny, irrelevant distinctions as t-shirt color are sufficient to create intergroup bias, and the simplest of artificial in-group/out-group situations can produce behavioral confirmation, then this proves their considerable power over our minds.<sup>137</sup> In yet another, politically-vital domain, we see just how far from the mark of rationality our minds are.

### **viii. Thinking like lemmings**

*“A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it.” – Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego**

*“Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to reform (or pause and reflect).”*

- Mark Twain, Notebook, 1904

To arrive at the understanding that we humans often make disastrous decisions in groups, it is hardly necessary to turn to social psychologists; opening a history book would

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<sup>137</sup> Klein and Snyder, “Stereotypes,” 218-219.

suffice. And it is precisely in this manner that psychologists began studying disastrously foolish and destructive group decisions. By analyzing disastrous group decisions like the U.S. invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, and the escalation of the U.S. war on Vietnam, “groupthink” research was born.<sup>138</sup> Groupthink is a phenomenon believed to occur in the presence of several antecedents: high group cohesiveness, which clamps down on individual freedom of expression; structural faults like group insulation, lack of impartial leadership, and methodical decision-making procedures; homogeneity of group members’ ideology and social backgrounds; and a situational context including stressful external threats, moral dilemmas, and recent failures. Once a group is caught in the grip of groupthink, it tends to display eight detrimental symptoms: illusions of vulnerability that encourage overoptimism and risk taking; an unshakeable belief in the group’s morality, such that members ignore the consequences of their actions; stereotyping opponents of the group as stupid or biased; rationalizing away warnings that challenge the group’s assumptions; illusions of unanimity; direct pressures to conform through labeling dissenters as disloyal; self-censorship of ideas in conflict with the group consensus; and the emergence of “mind guards,” self-appointed group members who police discussions and shield the group from dissent.

Early studies of groupthink were analytic and interpretive exercises, drawing upon source books and articles describing various historical cases to determine which groupthink symptoms were in operation during any given disastrous group decision. Experimental studies of groupthink have revealed it to be less of a scientific law occurring with regularity whenever required antecedents are present, and more of a fluid tendency of

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<sup>138</sup> Irving L. Janis, “Groupthink,” *Psychology Today* 5, no. 6 (1971).

group dynamics that appears in a variety of contexts, with some symptoms present and others absent.<sup>139</sup> When case analyses are compared with laboratory experiments of groupthink, two general patterns emerge: first, group cohesiveness is not required for groupthink symptoms to occur; second, structural and procedural flaws in groups are strong predictors of groupthink, in particular group insulation, promotional leadership, and homogeneity. (And beyond small groups, conformity is a broader, powerful force keeping political groups internally homogeneous through emotional reinforcement.)<sup>140</sup> Outside of the complex and context-specific domain of groupthink is another other bias in group thinking and decision-making that strays far from the rational ideal: group polarization.<sup>141</sup> Group polarization occurs when individuals enter a group with a certain average of opinions, and then group discussion and argumentation results in pushing that average toward a positive or negative extreme, depending on whether the initial opinion average was positive or negative. (Exactly *when* group polarization occurs, as opposed to productive deliberations that moderate and diversify group opinions, is undetermined, and likely reflects factors like group structure and topic of discussion.)<sup>142</sup> The irrationality of group polarization inheres in the process by which the opinions of individual group members are shifted by group dynamics. Spoiler alert: it does not occur by a process of rational persuasion based solely on the merits of the arguments.

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<sup>139</sup> James K. Esser, "Alive and Well after 25 Years: A Review of Groupthink Research," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2 (1998).

<sup>140</sup> Elizabeth Suhay, "Explaining Group Influence: The Role of Identity and Emotion in Political Conformity and Polarization," *Political Behavior* 37, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>141</sup> Noah E. Friedkin "Choice Shift and Group Polarization." *American Sociological Review* (1999); Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>142</sup> Gaurav Sood et al., "Deliberative Distortions? Homogenization, Polarization, and Domination," (unpublished manuscript, last modified January, 2016) Adobe PDF file.

Instead, while initial individual opinions and persuasive argumentation have their own influence on the outcome of group deliberations, so too do normatively irrelevant factors, like the social status, power, and perceived authority of individual group members.<sup>143</sup> Inequalities in the relative influence of group members do not flow solely from the intrinsic strength of arguments, but also from how individual arguers are perceived. If a group member displays social dominance, attractiveness, comes across as an authority or expert (regardless of whether this impression is accurate), or displays greater power than other group members, that group member will exert influence on the group's decision-making disproportionate to the actual strength of their arguments. Wealthy, aggressive, dominant blowhards who falsely claim expertise are more likely to influence group decision-making than true experts who are soft-spoken.

This is a particularly dangerous dynamic when socially-dominant individuals take the group majority position, and nonaggressive individuals take a minority position. Groupthink and group decision-making research reveals that the importance of vocal dissenters within a group cannot be underestimated. Even when dissenting voices do not convince a majority of the group, their dissent has been shown to stimulate innovation, prevent groupthink, reduce conformity, and lessen the tendency to search only for information that confirms what is already believed.<sup>144</sup> Minority dissenters push group members away from relying on easy System 1 processing, like using a simple "consensus

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. In groups that perform well on brainstorming, judgment, and planning tasks, the most important factor predicting success is equality of conversational turn-taking, followed by the *social* intelligence of group members (Pentland, 2014, 87-89).

<sup>144</sup> Carsten K.W. De Dreu et al., "Motivated Information Processing in Group Judgment and Decision Making," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 12, no. 1 (2008).

implies correctness” heuristic, and toward the use of deep and elaborate System 2 processing.

Experiments on information sharing within decision-making groups reveals another problem: group members tend to primarily discuss information they all share, while avoiding information held by only one or a few members.<sup>145</sup> This is far from ideal in all discussions, and all the more so when group discussions are intended to solve problems and arrive at solutions. Even when group members do share what they uniquely know, other group members tend to process information that is not held in common by the group in line with their own preferences, not giving it a fair evaluation. Group members tend to put a positive spin on information they have and favor, and a negative spin on available or anticipated counterevidence, exaggerating the importance of favored information and dismissing information that is inconsistent with their argument. Hence, when groups attempt to solve problems, and not all of the information about the problems is held in common by each group member, the quality of group decision-making suffers.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, group members with unique information may self-censor. Since only shared information can be validated by a group, possession of shared information confers greater legitimacy on a group member, pushing group members to broadcast what shared information they have while censoring themselves from sharing information unique to them. Unfortunately, real-world situations in which all group decision-makers share exactly the same complete information about an issue are exceedingly rare. Inestimably

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>146</sup> Andreas Mojzisch et al., "Biased Evaluation of Information During Discussion: Disentangling the Effects of Preference Consistency, Social Validation, and Ownership of Information," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (2010).

more common are situations that suffer from the dark side of group dynamics, where unique information is spun negatively or positively, or simply withheld or dismissed. Individual dispositions also play an important role in group decision-making; in particular, whether individuals have a “pro-social,” cooperative disposition, or a “pro-self,” competitive disposition. While pro-social group members tend to share accurate information with the group, pro-self group members engage in lying, deception, and misrepresentation when given the opportunity and where there are personal gains to be had.<sup>147</sup> Majority pro-social groups have their own problems. They are more likely to self-censor, and bias their provision of information toward information held in common rather than unique information. Groups with more pro-self members may at least allow for more divergent, creative thinking; but while groups with more pro-social members may arrive at agreements that better integrate all group members’ preferences, they may also be worse at coming up with novel and creative solutions.<sup>148</sup> Evidence also suggests that pro-self-oriented group members may exert more influence on the group than its pro-social members, infecting otherwise cooperative groups with their competitive orientation.<sup>149</sup> Evidence of groupthink and group polarization suggests that far from being reasonable thinkers who are swayed only by persuasive arguments, we at times resemble intellectual lemmings. We can form groups so assured of their own righteousness and intelligence that they are shockingly impervious to reality. When discussing issues in groups, we are swayed by trifles like a speaker’s social status, treating powerful blowhards’ arguments with undue deference, while ignoring potentially excellent arguments from shy and socially reticent

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<sup>147</sup> De Dreu et al., “Motivated Information,” 34.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 36-37.



group members. Even when we have potentially important information to share with the group, we may be swayed by social pressure to keep it to ourselves; and when others share information only they know, we are likely to discount it in favor of common knowledge. A media environment in which only some views are widely presented and others are excluded (along with the information comprising the views) may produce group discussions vulnerable to these pernicious dynamics. Although we may like to think of ourselves as intelligent, rational beings, in certain group structures we all too often come across as a relatively clever herd animal.

#### **ix. Beliefs persist, memories less so**

*"If the thing believed is incredible, it is also incredible that the incredible should have been so believed."*

- Augustine, *City of God*

Doubtless, we all have experiences with memory that amply demonstrate its weakness. We all have forgotten to do a favor for a friend, lost a phone or keys, remembered a deadline only once it was too late; or, been unable to forget the memory of an ex-lover or a traumatic experience even when we desperately wanted to. Psychologists who study memory have noted seven major classes of memory problems arising from the way our memories were developed by evolution.<sup>150</sup> They are: transience, how information becomes less accessible over time; absentmindedness, the inattentive processing of

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<sup>150</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 3 (1999).

information that weakens memories and makes us forget to do things in the future; blocking, or the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon where information in our memory is temporarily inaccessible; misattribution, where we mistakenly link a recollection or idea to the wrong source; suggestibility, the false memories that are created by leading questions and an attempt to recall distant experiences; bias, the distortion caused by unconscious influences that affect current knowledge and belief; and persistence, items in memory we wish we could forget, but cannot.<sup>151</sup>

Of greatest interest to us as political beings may be suggestibility and bias. Suggestibility has been the root cause of many a false confession, as well as false testimony by witnesses who believe themselves to be telling the truth. Bias in the context of memory can cause all sorts of political problems in a democracy. A population given to memory bias can be easily manipulated, as the people of the United States and Britain demonstrated over recent history with regard to the war against Iraq, its original rationale, and subsequent twists and turns in its justifications. Memory bias is painfully apparent in polls of the British and United States' public, asking how many people in Iraq died as a result of the war: only a tiny fraction responded with anything even approaching the scientific estimates, or even the record of violent deaths that made it into news reports – this despite the fact that these figures had appeared in the media.<sup>152</sup> Instead, people in the U.S. and Britain drastically underestimated the number of innocent people killed by a war for which they were at least distally responsible.

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<sup>151</sup> These same “seven sins” of memories apply just as well to beliefs, as both comprise the same sort of neural networks or cognitive webs in the brain (Taylor, 2006, 140-141).

<sup>152</sup> Joe Emersberger, “Poll Shows that UK Public Drastically Underestimates Iraqi War Deaths,” *Spinwatch* (June 4, 2013).

Political memories may be particularly susceptible to error. Not only do few of us have any direct experience with politicians and government officials, but political issues are highly abstract and can be emotionally charged. In one interesting study, liberals and conservatives were shown doctored photographs of Barack Obama shaking hands with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a friendly manner, and of George W. Bush entertaining baseball star Roger Clemens at his home while New Orleans was underwater after Hurricane Katrina.<sup>153</sup> Short captions describing the doctored photos and putting them in context were included. Conservatives were found to have a higher rate of false memory for the fabricated event putting Obama in a bad light, and liberals were found to have a higher rate of false memory for the fabricated event that put Bush in a bad light. If the problem with memories is that they are unreliable and can fade too easily, the problem with some beliefs is that they persist too long. In particular, beliefs that have been discredited or invalidated by new evidence tend to remain believed: the phenomenon of belief persistence.<sup>154</sup> (Belief persistence does not apply to just any belief, however. If we believe that we have enough vegetables at home to make a dinner, but then open our refrigerator to find that we do not, our prior belief is unlikely to persist. An incorrect belief cannot satisfy our hunger, and we will soon revise it.) Belief persistence begins to occur first when we are exposed to evidence that suggests a particular causal explanation for an event. We then construct a causal explanation for the event on the basis of that evidence. Here is where the problems begin: our causal explanation becomes functionally

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<sup>153</sup> Steven J. Frenda et al., "False Memories of Fabricated Political Events." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>154</sup> Martin F. Davies, "Belief Persistence after Evidential Discrediting: The Impact of Generated Versus Provided Explanations on the Likelihood of Discredited Outcomes," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33, no. 6 (1997).

independent of the evidence that originally supported the explanation. So when that evidence is later discredited or invalidated by new evidence, our causal explanation – our belief – remains intact. For instance, in one experiment, participants were given two case studies suggesting either that risk taking made one more or less successful as a firefighter.<sup>155</sup> Some were then asked to write about why this relationship exists (e.g., risk taking might make firefighters more likely to save people from burning buildings, or conversely that risk taking might make firefighters more likely to injure themselves or others). Then, participants were told that the case study evidence they had been provided with was actually entirely fake – no known relationship whatsoever existed between risk taking and success as a firefighter. Nonetheless, the participants continued to believe in the relationship – their beliefs persisted beyond the complete discrediting of the evidence upon which their belief was founded.

Key to the process of belief persistence is the generation of a causal explanation that puts a given piece of evidence into a narrative context. When we create our own causal narrative to explain a piece of evidence, we are integrating that evidence into a neural network which persists even after that evidence is discredited.<sup>156</sup> In the firefighter example, we take the evidence that risk-taking makes firefighters more successful, and create a story or stories that help illustrate it. We might imagine instances of brave firefighters running into burning houses and rescuing people trapped inside. If we then learn that the evidence upon which we imagined these instances was actually false, we may discard that evidence on its own - but the stories we imagined and the explanation we

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<sup>155</sup> Craig A. Anderson et al., "Perseverance of Social Theories: The Role of Explanation in the Persistence of Discredited Information," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 39, no. 6 (1980).

<sup>156</sup> Davies, "Belief Persistence," 575.

created persist. Only when we do not create our own explanation for a piece of later-discredited evidence does the phenomenon of belief persistence become unlikely to appear.<sup>157</sup>

Part of the problem with our minds that leads to belief persistence is that we seem to initially accept as true any proposition we are presented with.<sup>158</sup> At first glance, this seems farfetched. In fact, merely reading the first sentence of this paragraph and disbelieving it would seem to disprove the claim contained within it. The philosopher René Descartes would certainly have disagreed: according to him, we are at first neutral with regard to any proposition we are presented with, and as we process it we then determine whether to consider it true or false. Baruch Spinoza, on the other hand, believed that we initially consider any and all propositions we are presented with as true; afterward, we may either examine them and decide instead that they are false, or not examine them at all (for instance, if we are busy or distracted) and continue to believe that they are true. This philosophical debate was well summarized by Gilbert and colleagues: “For many centuries, philosophers have wondered whether the having and holding of ideas are psychologically separable operations, and for just as many centuries, ordinary folk have considered this a perfectly stupid question. Clearly, one experiences belief as though one were capable of entertaining ideas before endorsing them.”<sup>159</sup>

As counterintuitive as Spinoza’s position may seem, consider the following: how many people do we know whose collection of books radically contradicts their own beliefs?

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 574-576.

<sup>158</sup> Daniel T. Gilbert, “How Mental Systems Believe,” *American Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (1991); Daniel T. Gilbert et al., “Unbelieving the Unbelievable: Some Problems in the Rejection of False Information,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 4 (1990).

<sup>159</sup> Gilbert et al., “Unbelieving the Unbelievable,” 610.

How many devout Christians have a collection of books on atheism, or how many leftists have a collection of books by political conservatives? It seems rather that the books we read tend to convince us of the truth of their arguments – as if we are processing information in the way that Spinoza proposed. Of course, this could work in the opposite direction as well: we may choose books that correspond to what we already believe. Or, both processes could work at the same time: we selectively expose ourselves to ideas we think will fit with what we already believe, *and* we tend to believe the ideas we are exposed to.

A solid body of experimental evidence supports the proposition that we initially accept information as true as soon as we comprehend it, and only later may we decide that it is instead false. This ordering of our mental system may be evolutionarily adaptive: assuming that the majority of information we are presented with in our environment is in fact true, it is more economical to initially accept all information as true, and then examine it (if we have the chance) to determine whether it might actually be false. The problem is that we do not always have the mental resources available to subject new information to rigorous examination. When we are busy, distracted, or otherwise occupied, our System 1 process stamps “this is true” on new information, and our System 2 process never gets the chance to make a second, more elaborative determination. This is also how our visual system works.<sup>160</sup> We initially believe whatever it is that we see, and only sometimes does our System 2 process kick in to tell us we are witnessing an illusion: we see an oasis in the desert until we realize it is a mirage, or we see an animal moving in the shadows until we realize that it was just the wind moving some branches. The way we process information

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<sup>160</sup> Gilbert, “How Mental Systems,” 116-117.

seems to have evolved from the same functional lineage as our perceptual system. In the same way that when we see a lion charging towards us, we immediately believe that there is a lion charging towards us; when we hear someone say “there is a lion charging toward us,” we immediately believe that this is true. Only later, if we see that what looked at first like a lion was actually a housecat, or if we realize that “there is a lion charging toward us” was a practical joke, do we revise our beliefs.

This explanation receives powerful support in experiments where participants are asked to process pieces of information, and are later told whether the information was true or false. When participants were not distracted, and could process without hindrance both the initial pieces of information and the subsequent message explaining whether they were true or false, they were able to correctly remember true statements as true, and false statements as false. However, when participants were placed under mental load by a distracting task, they misremembered false statements as true – yet they did not misremember true statements as false. Instead, they continued to believe that the true statements they remembered were in fact true. Thus, the evidence indicates that we process all new information as initially true, and only if we have the mental resources available can we reclassify untrue information as false.

*Even when we know ahead of time that information we will be encountering is false, we continue to initially classify it as true. This surprising result is borne out by an experiment where participants were sometimes told before and sometimes told after being presented with information whether it was true or false – and no significant difference emerged between the two conditions.<sup>161</sup> We are apparently incapable of adopting a true*

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<sup>161</sup> Gilbert et al., “Unbelieving the Unbelievable,” 606-607.

skeptic's mindset, and initially evaluating new information as false as soon as we encounter it. Hence, this mental process of classifying new information as true is outside of voluntary, conscious control. Even if our conscious, System 2 process is warning us that the information we are about to be exposed to is false, our unconscious System 1 process will still stamp this information with the only stamp it has: "this is true!" Of course, our System 2 process can then later kick in and reclassify this information as false – but the problem with this corrective process is that we are often distracted or otherwise engaged. And when this is the case, we simply classify all new information as true, blissfully ignorant of whether or not we have just in effect swallowed a big lie.

Just as our process of evaluating new information is strikingly similar to the way we evaluate what we see with our eyes, it seems that we treat beliefs in a manner similar to the way we treat possessions. For one, our beliefs may be subject to the endowment effect in the same way that our possessions are: we value more highly a thing that we currently possess than that same thing if we do not possess it.<sup>162</sup> So too, we clearly value our own beliefs more highly than ideas we do not hold as our own beliefs. And we certainly do treat many of our beliefs as prized possessions, being as sensitive to criticism of them as we are careful in adopting only those new beliefs that do not conflict with the ones we already have and cherish. Robert Abelson explains:

If anyone is critical of [our beliefs], one feels attacked and responds defensively, as though one's appearance, taste, or judgment had been called into question. One occasionally adds new beliefs to one's collection, if they do not glaringly clash with those one already has. It is something like the accumulation of furniture. One is

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<sup>162</sup> Kahneman, "A Perspective," 705.



reluctant to change any of one's major beliefs. They are familiar and comfortable, and a big change would upset the whole collection.<sup>163</sup>

Hence, we are so difficult to persuade, even when our beliefs are premised upon false information. If persuasion means giving up a belief, then to be persuaded is to lose a potentially cherished possession.

Our tenacity in holding on to beliefs is exacerbated in the case of distal beliefs – Max Stirner's "spooks" – that is, ideas concerning abstract concepts, objects that are only remotely experienced, or anything that cannot be directly verified by our senses.<sup>164</sup> Distal beliefs include almost all political beliefs: whether austerity policies are economically beneficial or not, whether a war is justified and necessary or not, whether social spending by the government will lead to a healthier society or economic ruin, etc. Because these sorts of beliefs do not lend themselves to direct, corrective falsification, they are notoriously difficult to change. Further calcifying distal beliefs about politics, beliefs tend to increase in perceived value when they are threatened.<sup>165</sup>

Overall, we are a species with notoriously faulty memories, prone to gullibility when faced with new information, and tending to doggedly hold on to our beliefs as if they were cherished possessions even if they are discredited. This mental design may have been evolutionarily adaptive, but it is entirely alien to the liberal conception of the rational mind. And it poses a major impediment to the proper functioning of a marketplace of political ideas.

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<sup>163</sup> Robert P. Abelson, "Beliefs Are Like Possessions," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 16, no. 3 (1986): 231.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

## **x. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em: System Justification Theory**

*"People are not so easily got out of their old forms, as some are apt to suggest. They are hardly to be prevailed with to amend the acknowledged faults in the frame they have been accustomed to. And if there be any original defects, or adventitious ones introduced by time, or corruption; it is not an easy thing to get them changed, even when all the world sees there is an opportunity for it."*

- John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*

To read the early liberals, with their flowery yet vituperative condemnations of tyranny and illegitimate authority (Jean Meslier's "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest"), and their passionate appeals to the fundamental equality of human beings (Thomas Jefferson's "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"), it would be easy to forget that many if not all of them were perfectly comfortable with slavery, imperialism, and the subjugation of women.<sup>166</sup> Nonetheless, liberals from the Enlightenment to today believe that the natural state of humanity is freedom, and that oppression in any form will be hated, resisted, and ultimately overthrown.

Many historical examples indicate that this is not always the case, and numerous explanations have been offered as to why. Marx theorized that the ruling class determines which ideas become prevalent within a population, leading to "false consciousness" among the oppressed as they adopt the system justification offered by their oppressors; Gramsci

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<sup>166</sup> Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

updated and elaborated this idea with his conception of “cultural hegemony,” detailing the institutional and cultural means through which the ruling class created false consciousness among the masses; and Venício de Lima brought this idea into the modern, media-centric and television-dominated age, where television sets the “scene of the representation of politics.”<sup>167</sup>

Within psychology, system justification theory proposes another, related explanation which has accumulated significant evidentiary support. It explains that we are all psychologically motivated to a greater or lesser extent to excuse the moral and practical failings of the social, economic, and political systems we live in, and even to derogate and dismiss alternatives to them.<sup>168</sup> This unconscious process drives us to exaggerate our systems’ benefits, downplay their negative aspects, and view the status quo as more just and desirable than it really is.

Several aspects of our system justification tendency are well established by experiments: we are unconsciously motivated to defend and justify the status quo, including current social, economic, and political systems and institutions; the degree to which we are so motivated depends on individual differences as well as the situations we find ourselves in; this motivation is aroused when we feel dependent on or controlled by the system, when the status quo seems inevitable or inescapable, when inequality is salient, and when the system is challenged, threatened, or criticized; system justification soothes existential threats, insecurities and distress, and helps us achieve certainty and consistency in the worldviews we share with others and which coordinate our social relationships;

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<sup>167</sup> Venício A. de Lima, *Mídia: Teoria e Política* (São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2012).

<sup>168</sup> Jost et al., “A Decade”; John T. Jost et al., “The World Isn’t Fair”: A System Justification Perspective on Social Stratification and Inequality,” in *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 2*, ed. Jeffrey A. Simpson and John F. Dovidio, 317-340 (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015).

system justification enhances individual and collective self-esteem for those of us with high status, and conflicts with self-esteem for those of us with low status, leading them to display out-group favoritism; because confronting injustice and inequity is psychologically painful, system justification provides a palliative effect; and while system justification leads us to resist social change in general, we are more likely to embrace change when it is perceived as inevitable or extremely likely, or as allowing for the preservation of the system and its ideals.<sup>169</sup> For most of us, as for liberal theorists, this seems a perfectly strange, if not doubtful, phenomenon. Yet the experimental evidence for it is so strong and numerous as to be difficult to challenge.

In one experiment, members of a disadvantaged group were given either legitimate, illegitimate, or no explanations for a power differential between themselves and another group. Both legitimate and illegitimate (legitimacy was based on independent, pre-test ratings) explanations served to make the disadvantaged group feel better about their situation, and even led them to positively stereotype the more powerful out-group.<sup>170</sup> The system justification motive even led members of the disadvantaged group to misremember illegitimate explanations as legitimate (which more than 30 percent of them did, as opposed to only three percent who misremembered legitimate explanations as being illegitimate).

The status quo itself, *qua status quo*, seems to hold a special attraction to our minds, regardless of what we would like the status quo to be. In studies of an *anticipated*, future status quo, participants judged *likely* eventualities to be more desirable than *unlikely*

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Elizabeth L. Haines and John T. Jost, "Placating the Powerless: Effects of Legitimate and Illegitimate Explanation on Affect, Memory, and Stereotyping," *Social Justice Research* 13, no. 3 (2000).

eventualities.<sup>171</sup> In particular, before the 2000 presidential election in the United States, both Democrats and Republicans judged potential Bush and Gore presidencies to be more desirable as their likelihood increased, and less desirable as their likelihood decreased. In other words, despite wanting either Bush or Gore to win, the mere fact that Bush or Gore seemed *more likely* to win (and thereby form part of the future status quo) made either a Bush or Gore presidency more desirable than it otherwise would have been. This effect was not so strong as to make Bush supporters view a Gore victory as ultimately desirable (and vice versa), but it made a probable victory by the opposing candidate seem more desirable than it otherwise would have. In the same way, immediately *after* President George W. Bush's announcement of war plans against Iraq, Americans of all political leanings substantially increased their support for the war.<sup>172</sup>

Part of the reason why this seems so counterintuitive to us is that the system justification motive occurs outside of conscious awareness. For instance, few African Americans in the United States would consciously, explicitly accept that their unequal status on financial, professional, or educational measures is legitimate. Psychological studies bear this out just as clearly as social observation. But when intergroup bias is measured *implicitly*, low-status minority groups including African Americans often do not display common in-group bias, instead showing preferences for high-status out-groups. It was only in the System 2 realm, when African American respondents were asked to explicitly and consciously describe their opinions of the two groups, where the results were the opposite: higher in-group favoritism. In fact, due to the operation of the system

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<sup>171</sup> Aaron C. Kay, "Sour Grapes, Sweet Lemons, and the Anticipatory Rationalization of the Status Quo," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 9 (2002).

<sup>172</sup> Jost et al, "A Decade," 889.

justification motivation, European Americans display higher *implicit* in-group favoritism, and African Americans demonstrate higher *implicit* out-group favoritism.<sup>173</sup> This same pattern was uncovered in studies of young and old, and gay and straight people, and is accentuated by increasing political conservatism.

The tendency toward system justification is an unconscious, System 1 process operating outside of our awareness, which helps sooth and protect us from the painful psychological consequences of distressing thoughts. These thoughts can be about gross injustices in the systems in which we live, or even about death itself. In one experiment, American participants were subliminally presented with the word “death,” which led both to greater accessibility of death-related thoughts, as well as, oddly, a stronger preference for pro-American over anti-American authors.<sup>174</sup> It therefore seems that all manner of uncomfortable thoughts that challenge our worldviews can increase our support for whatever social, economic, and political system we happen to be living in.

Interestingly, while it makes intuitive sense that low-power groups with few socioeconomic resources should follow self-interest in wanting to reform the system to improve their situation, in reality the opposite is the case.<sup>175</sup> Groups low on the socioeconomic ladder tend to score higher on measures of right-wing authoritarianism, political conservatism, and the belief that the world is just.<sup>176</sup> In one experiment, after being reminded of how difficult it would be to leave a given system, participants became

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 894-906.

<sup>174</sup> Tom Pyszczynski et al., "A Dual-Process Model of Defense Against Conscious and Unconscious Death-Related Thoughts: An Extension of Terror Management Theory," *Psychological Review* 106, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>175</sup> This would have come as a surprise to James Madison, for one, who worried that if the vote were granted to all, the poor would use this power to reform the economic system in a radically egalitarian manner (Chomsky, 1996, 117-118).

<sup>176</sup> Jost et al., "A Decade," 910.

more accepting of that system's flaws *and* more critical of groups that criticized the system.<sup>177</sup> In another series of experiments, powerlessness – whether reported or primed – led to a greater sense of legitimacy and justification for one's superiors, the economic and social systems, and governmental authorities.<sup>178</sup> False consciousness, indeed: to escape the psychological pain inflicted by being at the bottom of an unjust or unequal social system, we unconsciously rationalize, justify, and support the very source of that psychological pain, even to the point of criticizing would-be reformers.

Perhaps of greatest concern for liberal democracy, there is evidence that as complex political issues become more important and urgent, we tend to avoid them all the more.<sup>179</sup> In other words, we literally choose to perpetuate our own ignorance precisely when knowledge is most urgently needed. Liberal theorists would quite reasonably expect that we would want to learn more about complex, poorly understood issues as they become more urgent (for instance, global warming as its consequences become more immanent, the reasons for waging a war as it becomes more likely to begin, or the effects of different economic policies once a recession hits). This is, after all, how democracy is supposed to work. Yet the system justification tendency produces the opposite effect: that as an issue looms larger and seems more dangerous, we become motivated to defend ourselves against the threat in the manner (falsely) imputed to ostriches, by burying our heads in the sand. Instead of learning more about the issue, we feel greater dependence on government,

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<sup>177</sup> Kristin Laurin et al., "Restricted Emigration, System Inescapability, and Defense of the Status Quo: System-Justifying Consequences of Restricted Exit Opportunities," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010).

<sup>178</sup> Jojanneke van der Toorn et al., "A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government," *Political Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>179</sup> Steven Shepherd and Aaron C. Kay, "On the Perpetuation of Ignorance: System Dependence, System Justification, and the Motivated Avoidance of Sociopolitical Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102, no. 2 (2012).

leading in turn to increased trust in the government, trust which can only be protected by intentionally avoiding the issue. A series of five experiments bears this theory out: as issues were perceived to be more complex, important, and urgent, participants demonstrated increased trust in the status quo, and intentionally avoided opportunities to educate themselves about the issues. As the experimenters explained:

Not only are people motivated to avoid social issues when they feel issues are complex—thus maintaining their present level of unfamiliarity—but this effect appears strongest for those issues believed to be most urgent and serious. It is at times when change is most needed, therefore, that people may become the most likely to defend the status quo and agents of sociopolitical systems. As such, the present studies suggest that rather than ensuring those in charge are maximally qualified to be in charge, and rather than remaining especially attuned to any limitations of the system, the psychological processes that are instigated when issues are seen as both severe and complex may limit any criticism of the current system and its decision-making process. And, perhaps even more critically, they may also prevent the types of behaviors, such as information gathering, that are necessary to efficacious social action...<sup>180</sup>

Even with a perfectly objective and balanced media system, our system justification tendency poses an obstacle to the proper functioning of democracy. Since we are unconsciously drawn to defend the status quo, we are motivated to avoid or explain away information that suggests problems in the status quo that need fixing. While the system justification tendency varies by individual and by situational context, its very existence means that information suggesting a need to change the status quo – particularly if change

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 275-276.



is perceived to be difficult or “unrealistic” – is more likely to be ignored or denigrated in favor of specious arguments that deny any need for change.<sup>181</sup> Even more disturbingly, we consciously choose to remain ignorant of complex, urgent issues in direct proportion to their complexity and urgency. This leads us to the conclusion that even in a perfectly objective media environment, we will tend to shun calls for greatly needed change in our social, economic, and political systems, and bury our heads in the sand when faced with complex issues in dire need of being understood and addressed.

**xi. But wait, there’s more: Attitude inoculation and counterintuitive effects**

*“The human understanding is no dry light, but receives infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called ‘sciences as one would.’ For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes. Therefore he rejects difficult things from impatience of research; sober things, because they narrow hope; the deeper things of nature, from superstition; the light of experience, from arrogance and pride; things not commonly believed, out of deference to the opinion of the vulgar. Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections color and infect the understanding.”*

- Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*

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<sup>181</sup> “Men find it difficult, Machiavelli noted, to accept a world of becoming; they hunger for constants. This leads them to create an illusory world which is then treated as though it were a real basis for action. In terms of human behavior this often took the form of clinging to certain habits despite their having been long outdistanced by the pace of events. Men preferred the security of a false world which was known to the anxieties of a ‘real’ world wherein the painful task of readjustment had to be undertaken anew. ... Man was truly *homo faber opinionum falsarum*, a spinner of fancies and illusions concealing the true nature of events.” (Wollin, 2004, 190)

We are all familiar enough with how vaccines and inoculation work: we are injected with a weak form of a pathogen or antigen, and this allows our immune system to evolve a defense to it. Later, if we are exposed to a strong form of the same pathogen or antigen, our evolved antibodies are prepared to eliminate it, and we are protected. Strangely, psychological research has uncovered the same process operating in the realm of ideas. When confronted with a weak form of an argument, we are less likely to be persuaded later by a strong form of that same argument.<sup>182</sup> While inoculation is uniformly beneficial in the medical context, in the intellectual context its effects are mixed: we are just as likely to become inoculated against a bad argument or idea as we are to be inoculated against a good argument or idea.

Attitude inoculation works in the following manner. When we are first exposed to a weak form of an argument, we incorporate it into our existing networks of beliefs and understanding. Since this particular argument is weak, it is unlikely to make room for itself or fit in among our existing network of beliefs. Instead, we incorporate it negatively; that is to say, we consider it to be false, and incorporate it into our beliefs by relating how it could not possibly be true given  $x, y,$  and  $z$  we already know. Later, when presented with a strong version of that same argument – an argument that we may have found convincing had we not first been exposed to a weaker version – we already have our network of beliefs organized negatively with respect to it. Whereas the strong argument *before* inoculation may have prompted us to reorganize our network of beliefs so as to accept it, the strong argument *after* inoculation meets with strong resistance from a network of beliefs

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<sup>182</sup> Michael Pfau et al., "Attitude Accessibility as an Alternative Explanation for How Inoculation Confers Resistance," *Communication Monographs* 70, no. 1 (2003).

prearranged to reject it. Even receiving a mere warning that we are about to hear an argument we will likely disagree with has been shown to significantly decrease our likelihood of being persuaded by it.<sup>183</sup>

Not only can weak arguments (or warnings) inoculate us from persuasion by a strong argument, but sometimes weak arguments can actually convince us in the contrary direction, by strengthening our confidence in the opposite of the weak argument.<sup>184</sup> This phenomenon can occur whenever we are presented with two sides of an argument: as jurors in a courtroom, as friends hearing about a dispute from the perspective of the two disputants, or as democratic citizens hearing two sides of a political issue in the media. What happens is that when we hear the argument of the first side of the dispute, we set down a reference point anchor related to that argument's strength; then, when we hear the counterargument, it must exceed that reference point in order to convince us. If it falls below that reference point anchor in terms of convincingness, the counterargument actually *increases* our confidence in the initial argument. This clearly poses dangers in how arguments are presented in the media. For instance, while it might at first seem an acceptable practice to give plenty of airtime or column inches to official spokespeople, and less to independent analysts or pressure groups on the other side of an issue, this may not provide balance at all. In fact, it may actually serve to strengthen the argument made by the side given more opportunity to make their case, and leave viewers and readers feeling more unfavorably toward the opposing side than even if the opposing side were given no opportunity whatsoever to present their argument.

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<sup>183</sup> Jonathan L. Freedman and David O. Sears, "Warning, Distraction, and Resistance to Influence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1965).

<sup>184</sup> Craig R.M. McKenzie et al., "When Negative Evidence Increases Confidence: Change in Belief after Hearing Two Sides of a Dispute," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 15, no. 1 (2002).

This danger is all the more acute in the realm of hot-button political issues, where we are already likely to assimilate arguments in a highly biased fashion.<sup>185</sup> When we already have an opinion on a given political issue, and are exposed to arguments on either side of the issue, from the very beginning we react differently to the two sides. Exposure to arguments against our preferred side of an issue causes a negative affective reaction: we emotionally recoil. This affective reaction then results in biased assimilation of the argument against our position, potentially leaving us even more convinced that our side of the argument is correct after we have been exposed to competing arguments. This, it is worth repeating, is the opposite of what would be expected when looking through the prism of the liberal ideal mind: that exposure to arguments on two sides of an issue should moderate, not polarize, our opinions.<sup>186</sup>

This counterintuitive prediction, supported by psychological research and contradicting the liberal ideal, is borne out by experiments in news media exposure. In one such experiment, participants were exposed to two frames of an issue, one weak and one strong, at two different times.<sup>187</sup> The political scientists who conducted the experiments expected that when first exposed to a strong frame of an issue, and then later a weak frame of the same issue from a different perspective, participants would display not much of an effect from the strong frame (as its effect might decay over time), and that the later weak frame would register insignificant effects, the net result being a reversion to the mean. Instead, they found – in line with the psychological research described above – that the

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<sup>185</sup> Geoffrey D. Munro and Peter H. Ditto, "Biased Assimilation, Attitude Polarization, and Affect in Reactions to Stereotype-Relevant Scientific Information," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 6 (1997).

<sup>186</sup> As John Stuart Mill wrote, "on every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons." (Mill, 1865, 21)

<sup>187</sup> Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Dynamic Public Opinion: Communication Effects Over Time," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 04 (2010).

strong frame shifted opinion in its direction, and stayed there. The only effect of exposure to the weak frame was to increase accessibility of the strong frame participants had been exposed to three weeks prior. Only equally-strong frames were found to cancel each other out; hence, if media balance is not achieved by equally strong presentations of competing arguments, the only effect of presenting shorter or weaker forms of opposing arguments may well be to strengthen opinions in the direction of the argument given a stronger presentation.

A much less surprising, though no less detrimental to the marketplace of ideas, bias in information transmission occurs on the opposite end of the communicator-receiver spectrum. When we need to communicate or summarize an argument or piece of information to an audience, we tend to modify our presentation to suit our audience's perceived preferences.<sup>188</sup> Although political-economic biases affecting the "supply side" of information coming through the media is the subject of a following chapter, this psychological bias is likely to affect communicators in the media as well as in individual or group discussions. If we tend to tailor our arguments to suit the preferences of our audience, we are more likely to sand off the rough edges of an argument that may need them in order to pack a punch sufficiently strong to be convincing. If so, our weakened argument may serve only to inoculate our audience from being convinced later by a stronger version, or even move them further in the direction opposite our argument.

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<sup>188</sup> Melvin Manis et al., "Transmission of Attitude Relevant Information through a Communication Chain," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 30, no. 1 (1974): 81-94.

## **xii. Like likes like: Ideological segregation**

*"In general, it may be affirmed that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, or services, or of relation to ourselves."*

- David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

From our own personal experience it is clear that we tend to prefer the company of those who are like us. Whether it be in terms of similar personalities, interests, hobbies, religion, or ideology, we are given to making friendships and choosing discussion partners from among those who are like us. Much recent focus has been on the new opportunities for and dangers of ideological segregation on the internet.<sup>189</sup> However, even before the internet, all the way back to the early days of the United States, there existed a vibrant, diverse, and highly ideological press, with publications geared toward ideologues of all stripes.<sup>190</sup>

Concern over ideological segregation in today's media environment is focused on its fragmentation: no matter what our viewpoint, it is possible to restrict ourselves to newspapers, magazines, television shows or channels, and internet sites that only reinforce and never challenge our views. Given the phenomenon of group polarization discussed above, this is of serious concern: groups comprising only likeminded individuals are given to adopt extreme positions. A related problem is that ideological segregation provides a

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<sup>189</sup> E.g., Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't Talk to Me': Effects of Ideologically Homogeneous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism," *New Media & Society*, 12 no. 4 (2010).

<sup>190</sup> See Chapter 5, section i.

breeding ground for violent extremism, which may only thrive when contacts with moderates are severed or limited.<sup>191</sup> Also, having a wealth of media options may lead to overall societal depoliticization, as those lacking interest in politics can more easily avoid exposure to it in favor of entertainment.<sup>192</sup>

In a correlational study of neo-Nazis and the internet, degree of extremism was closely correlated with participation in neo-Nazi online discussion forums, while controlling for age, gender, socioeconomic status and news media exposure.<sup>193</sup> Analysis of the forums themselves suggested that group polarization was occurring, as extreme perspectives were rationalized and reinforced, while other perspectives received punitive replies. While having like-minded friends and family was also found to predict extremism, so too was having family, friends, and acquaintances with dissimilar views, suggesting that encountering ideological resistance from direct contacts served only to strengthen extremism. One member of a neo-Nazi forum suggested that attitude inoculation explains this result: "we are existing in a world filled with influence, but are mostly immune to it because we have educated ourselves."<sup>194</sup>

A recent study of ideological segregation both online and offline found that while ideological self-segregation on the internet is higher than for broadcast news, cable news, magazines, and local newspapers, it is lower than that of national newspapers.<sup>195</sup>

Interestingly, ideological segregation on the internet is lower than random matching of

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<sup>191</sup> Russell Hardin, *How Do You Know? The Economics of Ordinary Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009): 185-204.

<sup>192</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*.

<sup>193</sup> Wojcieszak, "Don't Talk to Me."

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 650.

<sup>195</sup> Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (2011).

individuals within the same county, and much lower than random matching of individuals within the same zip code. Furthermore, it is significantly lower than the ideological segregation of real-life social networks in voluntary associations, the workplace, neighborhoods, families, trusted friends, and political discussants. What seems to be happening on the internet is that while people may preferentially visit sites that match their ideological bent, the vast majority also visit sites representing different, even opposite perspectives. As other research has found, frequent users of social media are particularly likely to be exposed to ideological diversity,<sup>196</sup> and while ideologues tend to cluster together on the internet, they also debate with ideological opponents.<sup>197</sup> Overall, current research has contradicted fears that the internet would lead to runaway group polarization and ideological segregation.<sup>198</sup> However, Gentzkow and Shapiro offered the following caveat to their findings, “that none of our evidence speaks to the way people translate the content they encounter into their beliefs,” emphasizing “the importance of further research on the formation and evolution of beliefs.”<sup>199</sup>

Herein lies the problem: since we are all affected by the kinds of unconscious psychological biases discussed above, even the fact that we tend to expose ourselves to an ideologically non-uniform diet of information sources online does not mean that we are absorbing such information without bias. Instead, we may be using biased processing for

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<sup>196</sup> Jihyang Choi and Jae Kook Lee, "Investigating the Effects of News Sharing and Political Interest on Social Media Network Heterogeneity," *Computers in Human Behavior* 44 (2015).

<sup>197</sup> Henry Farrell, "The Consequences of the Internet for Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 41-42.

<sup>198</sup> James G. Webster and Thomas B. Ksiazek, "The Dynamics of Audience Fragmentation: Public Attention in an Age of Digital Media," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>199</sup> Gentzkow and Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation," 1832.



all of the information we are exposed to, and our use of ideologically-opposed sources may serve to inoculate ourselves from new ideas rather than diversify or moderate our views.

However, ideological segregation is a malady only of the ideological. For those without a strong ideological inclination, the danger is that they may develop one through exposure to only one variety of partisan media – in which case, they would not be making their own choice of ideology (merely their own choice of media outlet). An ingenious experiment in Ghana exposed commuters to opposing partisan radio stations, and found that the nonideological participants had their opinions *moderated* by passive exposure to a mix of partisan messages.<sup>200</sup> This hints at a potential solution to the problem of ideological segregation: eliminate the segregationist barriers, by ensuring that all mass media outlets provide a high degree of ideological diversity internal to the outlet. Otherwise, it is not enough for the marketplace of ideas to function properly when, in Mao's words, we let a thousand flowers bloom. All of them must furthermore bloom in the same place.

### **xiii. Moral rationalization and conflict**

*"It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets."*

- Voltaire, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*

Stanley Milgram's work on obedience and the Stanford prison experiments are both widely known – and if history were not already clear enough on this point, they

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<sup>200</sup> Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Devra C. Moehler, "Moderation from Bias: A Field Experiment on Partisan Media in a New Democracy," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015).

demonstrate how easily ordinary people can be made to commit evil acts. Those of us considering entering the armed forces, or working for a company engaged in ethically questionable practices, are on notice for the dangerous influences we may be exposing ourselves to.

The psychological mechanisms that facilitate evil actions are of political interest beyond the actions themselves. In democracies, where the machinery of the state is at least normatively under the control of the citizenry, these psychological mechanisms have a dual import: we are also interested in them insofar as they may influence us in giving democratic assent to evil actions committed by our own governments. Democratic governments cannot survive for long without the support of public opinion; therefore, how public opinion may be swayed to support evil state action is an important question here. Even Milgram's classic experiments suggest ways in which democratic citizens can come to support evil state action.<sup>201</sup> When asked by the experimenter to apply potentially-lethal electric shocks to the "learner," only a third of participants who were so remote from their "learner" victim that they could not hear or see him defied the experimenter and refused to deliver all of the required shocks. However, with each stage of further proximity, from those who could only hear the victim's shouts, to those who were close by and were required to actually hold the victim's hand on the shockplate, defiance increased markedly. As Milgram observed, "it would appear that something akin to fields of force, diminishing in effectiveness with increasing psychological distance from their source, have a controlling effect on the subject's performance" in committing violence.<sup>202</sup> Being distant from our

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<sup>201</sup> Stanley Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," *Human Relations* 18, no. 1 (1965).

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

group's victim facilitates our participation in group violence: hear no evil, see no evil, allows us to commit evil. (Personality and ideological variables have also been found to influence compliance in a Milgram-like experiment.)<sup>203</sup>

The participants in Milgram's experiments often felt great distress, whether complying with the experimenter in delivering shocks or in ultimately defying him. This point may be the one anomaly separating this laboratory experiment from real-life instances of groups committing evil acts: as two psychologists noted, Milgram's "obedience paradigm generates conflict-induced stress rarely seen in individuals in ongoing organizations" whose ends are destructive.<sup>204</sup> In real-world groups, evil actions are so fragmented by organizational structure that the moral content of actions is made irrelevant. Furthermore, in organizational structures information is distributed such that it is impossible for any given individual to know what others in the organization are doing. Compounding this, language is often policed to replace words that nakedly reveal ongoing evil with euphemisms that veil it. And while psychological distance is one way to reduce individual responsibility, responsibility can be further reduced by a number of mechanisms, including a single-minded focus on following orders in lieu of any other motivation. Even when recruiting members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the Nazis' mobile killing units, those who felt physical pleasure from murdering and torturing were weeded out in favor of those whose single-minded focus would be the mere following of orders. Subsequent research confirms the macabre wisdom of this recruitment policy: a focus on roles is an important facilitator of immoral behavior, as it distracts us from the realization

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<sup>203</sup> Laurent Bègue et al., "Personality Predicts Obedience in a Milgram Paradigm." *Journal of Personality* 83, no. 3 (2015).

<sup>204</sup> Maury Silver and Daniel Geller, "On the Irrelevance of Evil: The Organization and Individual Action," *Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 4 (1978): 128.

that we are violating our own moral code.<sup>205</sup> We are “just following orders.” The same effect seems to be produced by routinization: this too provides a distraction from the meaning of a task, making us miss the forest for the trees. Lastly, self-affirmation provides us an escape valve if we were ever to come face to face with the intrinsic evil of our actions and role within a group. We seem to need only to affirm another part of ourselves in order to paper over evil actions we commit (“yes, I kill dozens of people every day, but boy am I a good coach for my children’s volleyball team!”).

In societies at war or other extended violent conflict, researchers have noted eight societal beliefs that sustain an “ethos of intractable conflict”: that the nature of group goals is just, of supreme importance, and that failing to achieve them may threaten the very existence of the group; that the group’s opponent is evil, wrong, aggressive, or dangerous; that the in-group is skilled, virtuous, moral, heroic, and has contributed positively to humanity and civilization; that the in-group has been victimized by an opponent; that security is of utmost importance and is under serious threat; a form of patriotism in which group members are asked to sacrifice for the group, and blind adherence to the group’s leaders is demanded; that unity is necessary for the accomplishment of the common cause; and that peace is the ultimate goal, but is imagined in utopian, general, and vague terms without specifying its concrete meaning or steps to achieve it.<sup>206</sup> Though the psychological biases discussed above may be themselves sufficient to support an ethos of intractable conflict, they can be reinforced and aided through media coverage either designed to assist

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<sup>205</sup> Jo-Ann Tsang, “Moral Rationalization and the Integration of Situational Factors and Psychological Processes in Immoral Behavior,” *Review of General Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>206</sup> Ervin Staub and Daniel Bar-Tal, “Genocide, Mass Killing and Intractable Conflict: Roots, Evolution, Prevention and Reconciliation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, edited by David O. Sears et al., 710-743 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

in achieving military goals or simply being deferential to the government and the military.<sup>207</sup>

These insights from psychological studies of moral fragmentation and rationalization are directly relevant for democratic societies. Whenever war, military aid to foreign countries, or even economic policies that threaten to decimate segments of other countries' economies are involved, moral rationalization is a constant danger. Firstly, all three involve great distances, separating democratic citizens from the potential victims of government policies and facilitating the process of moral rationalization. Not only are military aid and predatory economic policies distant in geographical terms, but they rarely attract media coverage that might make them seem present to any appreciable degree. Even war itself, while potentially attracting much more media coverage, rarely presents victims' perspectives. Bombers taking off from aircraft carriers can make it into media coverage, but the bloody, contorted bodies of bombing victims almost never enter citizens' living rooms through television. Moreover, the moral fragmentation of military organizations makes it into media coverage through embedded journalism: individual soldiers are presented both as human interest stories and in terms of their individual tasks and roles within the overall military system. The sanitizing effect of euphemistic language also comes through media coverage of war, turning dismembered bodies of innocents into "collateral damage," a nearly meaningless, entirely affectless term. Topping off this dangerous mixture is the morally soothing effect of self-affirmation. Reminding media readers and viewers of the moral justification for a war and the moral virtue of their country overall provides self-affirmation in the face of what might otherwise provoke

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<sup>207</sup> Yoram Peri, "Intractable Conflict and the Media," *Israel Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007).

discomfort and soul-searching. Lastly, fear of being demonized as “unpatriotic” or losing market share by being contrarian can push media outlets into acting as reinforcers of an ethos of intractable conflict, providing specious justifications for acts of violence while at the same time hiding or sanitizing them.

#### **xiv. Self-deception**

*“Nothing is so easy as to deceive one’s self; for what we wish, we readily believe.”*

- Demosthenes, *Third Olynthiac*

*“A dictator ... must fool all the people all the time and there's only one way to do that, he must also fool himself.”*

- W. Somerset Maugham, “Stranger in Paris”

*“To succeed in chaining the multitude, you must seem to wear the same fetters.”*

- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, “Miscellany”

If many of the biases discussed above carry a whiff of self-deception, there is a strong evolutionary reason: accumulated evidence from evolutionary biology, studies of our animal cousins, and experiments on our own evolved psychology powerfully support the hypothesis that self-deception is evolutionarily adaptive.<sup>208</sup> The central proposal of this approach is that by deceiving ourselves we can better deceive others, by avoiding the

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<sup>208</sup> Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); William Von Hippel and Robert Trivers, “The Evolution and Psychology of Self-deception,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34, no. 01 (2011).

display of any cues of consciously-chosen deception that might give away our intent to deceive. Secondly, by evolving the capacity to deceive ourselves we were able to not only avoid the cognitive costs of consciously-mediated deception, but also to reduce the amount of retribution we would face from others if our deception were uncovered. The legal system recognizes as well as the common person that *intent* matters; and if we have not *intended* to deceive others, then we can expect them to be less angry and act in a less retaliatory fashion if they discover that they have in fact been deceived. After all, we did not intend to deceive them – if, we first deceived ourselves.

Confidence is a major determinant of the influence we have on others: the more confident we seem, the more likely we are to be believed by others, and the more likely others are to follow our advice. As such, confidence is highly evolutionarily adaptive, and we can expect mechanisms to have evolved to increase the confidence we display to others. This is indeed what has been found in a vast array of experimental studies: that we tend to exaggerate our own virtues and minimize our shortcomings, even to the point of interpreting or remembering past events in the light most favorable to ourselves while being credible to ourselves and others.<sup>209</sup> Of course, we do not consciously recognize that we do so: instead, we deceive ourselves into viewing ourselves more positively than objective reality would warrant, thereby increasing the guileless confidence we display. This, in turn, enables us to increase our status in the eyes of our peers.<sup>210</sup>

Initially, however, self-deception seems a contradictory concept: how can the same person simultaneously believe one thing and its opposite, and how can oneself deceive

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<sup>209</sup> Mark D. Alicke and Constantine Sedikides, "Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection: What They Are and What They Do," *European Review of Social Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>210</sup> Von Hippel and Trivers, "The Evolution," 5.

oneself without letting oneself in on the deception?<sup>211</sup> The self must somehow be both deceiver and deceived, at the same time. This seeming contradiction disappears, however, once we discard the notion of a unitary self. In light of advances in psychology and neuroscience, it is clear that different parts of the mind can operate outside of conscious awareness, at cross-purposes; exactly what is required for *self*-deception to be possible.<sup>212</sup> “The” self does not deceive “the” self; parts of the self deceive other parts of the self.

Self-deception is also rife in our memories.<sup>213</sup> At the base of this deep form of self-deception is our dual-track memory: we are capable of storing information that we can consciously recollect, as well as information for which we have no conscious recollection. The basic process involved may simply be that we tend to store and rehearse self-promoting (mis)information in consciously accessible memory, while information that would frustrate self-deception is relegated to inaccessible memory. Rehearsing misinformation makes our memory of it more resilient, and its origin more difficult to ascertain. Sharing a self-deceptive memory with others makes it stronger, and then receiving social confirmation of the false memory we have shared makes it stronger still. At the end of this winnowing and selection process, we retain false, self-enhancing memories in conscious memory, and exile accurate information that may detract from our positive self-presentation to unconscious memory.

Another form of self-deception we have already touched on in the discussion of system justification theory centers around explicit and implicit attitudes. High-power

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<sup>211</sup> Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001): 38-39.

<sup>212</sup> Tatiana Bachkirova, "A New Perspective on Self-Deception for Applied Purposes," *New Ideas in Psychology* 43 (2016): 1-5.

<sup>213</sup> Von Hippel and Trivers, "The Evolution," 6-10.



groups tend to have modest conscious, explicitly-expressed opinions of themselves, but less modest unconscious, implicit opinions; to the contrary, low-power groups have higher explicit opinions of themselves, but unconsciously they tend to have higher implicit opinions of high-power out-groups. So it is that people who are asked whether or not they are prejudiced against a minority ethnic group say that they are not; yet when their implicit, unconscious responses to minority ethnic group members are measured, their hidden prejudice is revealed. This result does not occur due to conscious lying. Rather, it occurs as a result of self-deception: we are simply consciously unaware of our prejudice. This dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes facilitates self-deception by enabling us to openly express socially desirable attitudes, while at the same time *acting upon* socially undesirable attitudes (like ethnic prejudice) that are hidden from conscious awareness. Through self-deception, we confer plausible deniability on ourselves.<sup>214</sup>

Just as attitudes and memory have separate conscious and unconscious components, so too do our goals and our efforts in achieving them. We are capable of having both conscious and unconscious goals, and behavior aimed at achieving our goals can take place automatically, outside of conscious awareness. In this way, we can simultaneously have consciously-held goals that are socially acceptable, while having unconsciously-held alternative goals that may bring disapproval or worse from family, friends, or loved ones.<sup>215</sup> For instance, we may have a conscious goal of continuing a romantic relationship because we love another person for who they are; yet we may have an unconscious goal operating at the same time, to continue a romantic relationship for

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

sexual or material benefits instead. Yet when asked by our lover or others why we are in the relationship, we can honestly say, without expending any mental effort on producing a believable lie, that we simply love the other person for who they are. This, after all, is our conscious goal; hidden to us is our unconscious goal to use the other person for sexual or material benefits. Remember the split-brain experiments by Michael Gazzaniga: the “interpreter” in our minds is quite adept at creating convincing yet false explanations to ourselves and others about our goals, without any awareness on our part that these explanations are essentially lies. Just like the split-brain patients, we simply do not realize that they are lies.

To borrow an analogy from Von Hippel and Trivers, imagine deception as sex, and self-deception as masturbation.<sup>216</sup> We evolved to enjoy sex because it facilitates reproduction. Yet as our species evolved, we were able to readapt our evolved sexuality to enjoy it through masturbation. In the same way, the ability to deceive others evolved far back in history, as is evident from the countless species that deceive each other, predators, and prey using a wide array of devices. Once a solid basis for deceiving others had developed, the ground was laid for readaptation to deceive ourselves. So long as the social consequences of self-deception were neutral, or even increased evolutionary fitness – which seems quite likely – our capacity to deceive others could have evolved into an ability to deceive ourselves.

Unconscious self-deception can work on several levels: by searching more or selectively searching for evidence that supports our conscious as opposed to unconscious goals or desires, or by selectively devoting conscious attention to such information; by

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 12.

interpreting new evidence or information in a biased manner; by misremembering evidence that weighs against our unconsciously desired self-image or goals; by rationalizing away the motives of a behavior to make it more socially acceptable; or by convincing ourselves that a lie is true, which has been proven possible by studies of split-brain patients and others with neurological damage. These powerful mechanisms may explain how the system justification tendency works, as a form of self-deception imposed upon us by our undesirable position within a social system. Since we unconsciously seek to avoid the psychologically painful realization of the injustice and inequity we face, through these mechanisms of self-deception we convince ourselves that the system is in fact fair, and those groups who dominate or exploit our own are superior and deserving of their position.

Self-deception can be readily observed throughout the political realm as well.<sup>217</sup> In fact, many of the mechanisms involved in moral rationalization and the ethos of intractable conflict are one and the same as those providing for self-deception, whether on an individual or social scale. We deceive ourselves into thinking that our group's violence is justified, and bolster this self-deception by selectively attending to information we see in the media, misremembering or revising the history of our conflict, ignoring contrary information, and shunning those who challenge our self-deception.

At this societal level, we certainly seem to have gotten better at self-deception over the years. While the Mongols may have had a frank and honest assessment of their goals in conquering their neighbors (territory, wealth, and power), in modern times, while the

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<sup>217</sup> Trivers, *The Folly*, 215-276.

underlying goals have been the same,<sup>218</sup> they are rarely recognized. At least for most, they have gone under the conscious radar. They have been replaced by deceptive justifications: Japan defending the East from western imperialism and creating an “Asian co-prosperity sphere,” Britain bringing civilization to barbarians around the world, the United States “Christianizing” the Philippines or defending itself from Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, etc. If this historical trajectory toward greater societal self-deception is accurate, it would suggest a prominent role for the media: over time, as information flows expand and public opinion increases in importance and susceptibility to persuasion, naked aggression feels the need to put on some clothes.

#### **xv. Styles of thought**

*“To think is first of all to create a world (or to limit one’s world, which comes to the same thing).”*

- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

At least since the work of developmental psychologists like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, there has been great interest in how moral and other reasoning develops in human beings, from childhood to adulthood. By analyzing the moral reasoning of young boys across several countries, Kohlberg and Gilligan proposed six discrete stages

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<sup>218</sup> Minus territory, of course; there is no need to extend the *de jure* national territory if wealth and power can be gained just as well through less expensive, more subtle means that arouse less opposition.

of development in moral reasoning divided into three major levels: the preconventional, conventional, and postconventional or autonomous.<sup>219</sup> Like Piaget's stages of cognitive development, these stages of development in moral reasoning were proposed to be followed in order, though not everyone within a population achieved the highest level. Intelligence quotient (IQ) test scores do not correlate closely with such development in reasoning sophistication, and, perhaps surprisingly, a large percentage of adult Americans were found to have failed to develop to the highest stage of reasoning and displayed serious difficulty with abstract thought.

As cognitive and evolutionary psychology developed, Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories of development in reasoning were questioned. Evidence began to accumulate that our minds are compartmentalized to handle different sorts of thinking and reasoning tasks, and that development across these several modules proceeds unevenly.<sup>220</sup> More recent work, which builds on Piaget and Kohlberg, has proposed three discrete styles of reasoning that can characterize individuals' thought.<sup>221</sup>

The simplest is sequential reasoning, which is dominated by the immediacy of present circumstances and feelings; its focus is constantly shifting, and it depends on immediately-perceived appearances while evading abstract concepts, categories, and complex causal relations. One could imagine the process of sequential reasoning as consisting of innumerable unconnected line segments, joining separate perceptions to separate evaluations of them, without being organized into any complex, overarching

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<sup>219</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as a Philosopher: The Discovery of the Self in a Postconventional World," *Daedalus* (1971).

<sup>220</sup> E.g., Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology."

<sup>221</sup> Shawn W. Rosenberg, *The Not So Common Sense: Differences in How People Judge Social and Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

relationships. The most common form of reasoning is linear thinking, which is comfortable with abstracting actors and actions from the observed environment and judging them across situational contexts. Linear thinkers tend toward the all-or-nothing in evaluating individuals and groups: if a person is judged positively, then all of his or her attributes are also likely to be judged positively, and if a group or category is judged positively, then all members of that group or category are likely to be judged positively. When linear thinkers are confronted with new observations that conflict with their judgments and categorizations, they attempt to explain away or diminish the inconsistencies (as in cognitive dissonance reduction). Linear reasoning could be imagined as a series of connected line segments in two dimensions, but without many interconnections between them. Linear thinkers might reason “Baptists are good people → Joe is a Baptist → therefore Joe must be a good person” – and if confronted with evidence that Joe often commits morally wrong actions, the linear thinker would be likely either to explain away the evidence or decide that Joe must not be a true Baptist. Systematic reasoning, the most complex form, goes about things quite differently. It can be imagined as a complex network diagram in three dimensions, with nodes connected to each other with several separate lines. A systematic thinker in the same example above would be unlikely to consider “Baptists are good people” in the first place – rather, systematic thinkers would conceive of Baptists as a heterogeneous group, a majority perhaps of which are good people, but which includes all sorts including those who act in morally reprehensible ways at times. Systematic thinkers are those that most closely approximate the liberal ideal of human reasoning, yet they are unlikely to comprise more than a relatively small fraction of an overall population.

While research has yet to determine whether or to what extent sequential, linear, and systematic thinkers are differentially vulnerable to the psychological biases discussed above, the question is ripe for speculation and experimental testing. The three types of thinkers have been shown to exhibit significant differences in conceptualizing national identity and opinions on immigration.<sup>222</sup> In particular, the worrying results of much media effects research – for instance, the power of framing and agenda-setting to influence public opinion – may be a byproduct of linear reasoning and as such could be limited to those who primarily think in a linear fashion.<sup>223</sup> One study examining media effects in light of these styles of thinking found precisely that: linear thinkers are most vulnerable to persuasion by the way information is presented in television news.<sup>224</sup>

Whether psychological biases affect the way all of us absorb and think about political information from the media, or mostly the majority of us who primarily think in a linear fashion, they are of concern for both democratic theory and the way our media systems are structured.<sup>225</sup> In the following discussion, we will discuss ways that the media can more successfully facilitate a functioning marketplace of ideas given the kinds of minds we actually have.

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<sup>222</sup> Shawn Rosenberg and Peter Beattie, “The Cognitive Structuring of American Identity: Individual Differences in the Logic, Content and Affect of National Identification,” preprint, submitted April 15, 2016; Rosenberg et al., “Migration: The Political Psychology of the Host Nation,” (unpublished manuscript, May 30, 2016) Microsoft Word file.

<sup>223</sup> Rosenberg, *The Not So Common*, 182-183.

<sup>224</sup> Joseph J. Braunwarth, “The Cognitive Conceptualization of Television News and the Practice of Politics” (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 1999).

<sup>225</sup> This research “suggests that development of systematic thinking is within the grasp of most people. As such, it is the moral responsibility of society to create the conditions – educational, economic and cultural – that facilitate development. Put in more political terms, the first and most critical responsibility of a democracy is to create the citizenry it requires.” (Rosenberg and Beattie, forthcoming, 34)

## **xvi. A media adapted to our minds**

*"When we treat man as he is, we make him worse than he is; when we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be."*

- attributed to Johann von Goethe

Our minds are prone to several serious biases that hamper our ability to be rational, objective thinkers. This, in turn, skews the manner in which we process information from the media. Even if the media were perfectly objective (a highly doubtful proposition, given the political-economic pressures operating on them), we would still process that objective information in a biased fashion. But might the media present information in such a calculated way that, after we process it in our typically biased manner, we absorb, store, and act on it as if we were immune to our own biases?

This may seem fanciful at first, but there is uplifting evidence that when we discuss and argue over issues in heterogeneous groups, we collectively arrive at more rational conclusions than we otherwise would on our own.<sup>226</sup> In fact, the paradigm that seems to govern problem-solving deliberation is "truth wins" – a group member who has devised the correct solution usually proves successful in convincing the rest of the group.<sup>227</sup> Media presentations that take advantage of this property of group discussions may help us all individually act closer to the rational ideal.

For this to occur, panel discussions and editorial sections in every media source would have to broaden their ideological representation, to ensure that every available

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<sup>226</sup> Mercier and Sperber, "Why Do Humans"; Pentland, *Social Physics*, 87-89.

<sup>227</sup> Mercier and Sperber, "Why Do Humans," 62, 72.



solution to a given political problem is represented. Moreover, discussions and editorials would have to maximize the space available for clearly expositing arguments, and reduce irrational and affective factors like visual cues that appeal to System 1 processing. Ideological uniformity is something to be assiduously avoided. Even an only *seeming* diversity of opinion may be dangerous – giving space in the media only to representatives of either pole of dominant opinion gives the false impression that the conventional wisdom on the Left or Right represents the *entirety* of perspectives on and potential solutions to political problems. More than this, we need consistent exposure to samples of political opinion throughout its entire spectrum, not merely that constricted portion that is prevalent. While it might seem convenient to have entire television news channels devoted to presenting one or the other side of prevalent political opinion, this form of media organization inhibits the workings of our group argumentation process and makes it more difficult for it to achieve its salutary outcomes. Instead, the present system of media organization lends itself to group polarization,<sup>228</sup> confirmation bias, and biased searching for information.

We already have evidence of how ideological diversity in media presentation can reduce bias and possibly even facilitate “truth wins” outcomes. While the effect of strong media frames is to bias our opinions in their direction, and weak opposing media frames seem to merely reinforce the stronger frames, equally strong frames on opposing sides cancel out each other’s effects on average opinion. This does not suggest when we are

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<sup>228</sup> A recent example of media-fueled group polarization in the U.S. is the divergent reactions to the Great Recession: rightwing media seems to have pushed Republicans’ opinions further in the direction of reducing government involvement in the economy, while a lack of equally-leftwing media kept Democrats’ opinions closer to the Congressional mainstream of tepid government involvement (Brooks and Manza, 2013, 740-742).

exposed to two well-presented sides on an issue, we individually ignore both of them and our opinions remain where they started. Rather, that only occurs for *average* opinion. On an individual level, we may find one presentation far more convincing than the other, as it fits better with what we already know – and others may react the same way to the opposing presentation. Once incorporated into our respective structures of knowledge and beliefs, we can then devise our own personalized arguments. In ideologically diverse group discussions (if we are lucky to have them in the first place), then truth can in fact win, helped by exposure to two strong frames in the media. A mixture of one strong frame and one weak frame, on the other hand, is likely only to facilitate group polarization.

It is important to have not only two, but multiple strongly-presented frames of issues presented in the media.<sup>229</sup> The epistemologically-optimal organization is plural and open: political events and issues are presented in more than one interpretive frame, and these frames are not placed in any implicit hierarchy that privileges one over another.

Experimental research has found that exposure to multiple, balanced frames cause us to deviate less from our core values compared to uncontested single frames.<sup>230</sup> We may still be subject to unconscious psychological biases, but we are also under anticipated social pressure to believe only that which we can convincingly argue to others. Hence, by being exposed to multiple strong frames of any given issue, it becomes harder to deceive ourselves about the validity of our beliefs: we are made (painfully) aware of their weaknesses, and the strengths of opposing perspectives.

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<sup>229</sup> Mauro P. Porto, "Frame Diversity and Citizen Competence: Towards a Critical Approach to News Quality," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>230</sup> Peter Beattie and Jovan Milojevich, "A Test of the 'News Diversity' Standard: Single Frames, Multiple Frames, and Values Regarding the Ukraine Conflict," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (forthcoming).

Again, ideological minority perspectives are essential here. As we saw earlier, minority dissent has been shown to stimulate divergent thinking and innovation, prevent groupthink, reduce group polarization and conformity, and lessen confirmatory information search. Also, in dealing with group conflicts, we unconsciously devalue proposals for a solution we perceive as coming from the other side – but this does not occur when the solution comes from a third party.<sup>231</sup> Hence, for our media systems to work symbiotically with the way our minds have evolved, we need to be exposed to multiple, majority and minority perspectives on political issues, from many different sources. Just as exposure to multiple perspectives on an issue assists us in our striving toward rationality, so too does exposure to arguments coming from out-group members. Of course, in-group members are just as capable of convincingly communicating any given political perspective; but our unconscious in-group bias is reduced when we have more exposure to out-group members.<sup>232</sup> This “deprovincialization” process works by bringing similarities we have in common with out-group members to the fore. This weakens the psychological boundaries between “us” and “them,” and blunts the pervasive effects of in-group bias. By being exposed to strong arguments coming from out-group members (foreigners, minorities) and ideological opponents, our unconscious System 1 process has less of a chance to shut them out, miscategorize them, and erect psychological walls to muffle their attempts to communicate with us. This is not to say that a highly diverse media system can entirely mute our psychological biases; but it may be able to muzzle them.

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<sup>231</sup> Lee Ross, “Reactive Devaluation in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution,” in *Barriers to Conflict Resolution*, ed. Kenneth J. Arrow et al., 26-42 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

<sup>232</sup> Katharina Schmid et al., “Antecedents and Consequences of Social Identity Complexity: Intergroup Contact, Distinctiveness Threat, and Outgroup Attitudes,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (2009).

Rather than accentuating it or allowing it to thrive, the media can be a powerful tool to reduce intergroup bias. Interventions to reduce intergroup bias by teaching us to classify others on multiple dimensions have proven successful.<sup>233</sup> Friendships with out-group members reduce in-group bias – and not only for the individuals with out-group friends, but even for their group overall.<sup>234</sup> Our natural tendency, under the influence of unconscious in-group bias, is to perceive out-groups like “enemy” nations as homogenous. By being exposed to out-group members of diverse ideological perspectives, it becomes harder to hold on to a separate “them” category totally different from “us,” and our in-group bias is weakened. For instance, if the American public had been thoroughly exposed to the arguments and perspectives of diverse segments of Iraqi society – Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, fundamentalists, moderate religious believers, atheists, Baath party members, communists, democrats, etc., not to mention foreign (and American dissident) intellectuals and analysts of all sorts who found the U.S. administration’s justification for the war spurious from the start – it would have been harder for in-group bias to skew public opinion and irrationally aggravate perceived conflict.

Even more, the media can sidestep the effects of intergroup bias by promoting the psychological creation of a superordinate group: humanity. Multiple group identities can be managed in several ways, but the form of management that leads to best results is inclusive and additive.<sup>235</sup> In this way, one of us may be female, Guatemalan, heterosexual, leftwing, democratic, and human; and each of these can create its own interpenetrating,

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<sup>233</sup> Hewstone et al., “Intergroup Bias,” 587-593.

<sup>234</sup> Mackie and Smith, “Intergroup Relations,” 513.

<sup>235</sup> Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Many Faces of Social Identity: Implications for Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001); John F. Dovidio et al., “Commonality and the Complexity of “We”: Social Attitudes and Social Change,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 13, no. 1 (2009).

nonexclusive in-group. With the inclusion of “human” as an in-group category, the potential space for creating out-groups shrinks to zero. This sort of superordinate group category has been shown to reduce in-group bias among high-power, majority group members, pushing them to support policies designed to reduce inequities between groups. At this point in history, the nation-state provides a superordinate group (often comprising several different ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups), an in-group for citizens, and out-groups for everyone else. The media can mute the effects of intergroup bias by downplaying the salience of these group boundaries. This can be done through subtle ways (e.g., avoiding the use of nationality adjectives in describing out-group members, as is already done when describing in-group members), and in larger ways (by increasing access to diverse foreign perspectives, which breaks down the salience of group boundaries).

Besides intergroup bias, the media can also be redesigned to reduce the irrational effects of other psychological biases. One very simple approach that has been found to reduce bias in experimental participants is to urge them to consider the opposite.<sup>236</sup> Simply mentally entertaining the opposite of our initial beliefs makes us less likely to process information in a biased manner and promotes unconscious impartiality. This is a form of actively open-minded thinking, which has proven effective in reducing confirmation bias and intergroup bias, even in the presence of strongly-held preconceptions and historical narratives.<sup>237</sup> The media can attempt to replicate these same effects, by urging viewers and readers to actively consider the opposite of their own political views and the views being presented. Doing this in conjunction with providing multiple frames of an issue coming

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<sup>236</sup> Charles G. Lord et al., "Considering the Opposite: A Corrective Strategy for Social Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (1984).

<sup>237</sup> Tsafirir Goldberg et al., "'Could They Do It Differently?' Narrative and Argumentative Changes in Students' Writing Following Discussion of 'Hot' Historical Issues," *Cognition and Instruction* 29, no. 2 (2011).

from diverse perspectives may promote actively open-minded thinking, stopping our unconscious System 1 biases in their tracks.

This sort of media practice may also prevent moral rationalization. Since physical distance from a victim makes moral rationalization more likely, and our sense of familiarity and physical distance overlap and interlink, then it stands to reason that increasing familiarity with another group or country makes it seem less distant, which would impede moral rationalization of harmful actions taken against that country or group. Also, the mere presence of bystanders decreases our unconscious ability for moral rationalization, so being exposed through the media to citizens or members of demonized countries or out-groups may function to produce a similar bystander effect.

In her powerful survey of how the media has both aggravated and helped resolve conflicts around the world, Maria Armoudian suggests a largely untapped role for the media to play in solving and preventing violent conflict, and promoting the conditions for democracy to flourish among our flawed human minds.<sup>238</sup> For every example of the media fanning the flames of violent conflict, there is another example of the media successfully promoting conflict resolution and positive social change – often in the very same countries (for instance, South Africa during and after apartheid) over time. While a homogeneous or orthodox media environment can have serious and negative consequences within and between populations, having a diversity of perspectives and voices in the media stunts the growth of violent extremism.

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<sup>238</sup> Maria Armoudian, *Kill the Messenger: The Media's Role in the Fate of the World* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

## **xvii. Conclusion**

*"Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard."*

- H. L. Mencken, *A Little Book in C Major*

Clearly, the rational ideal of the human mind promoted by liberal theorists and widely diffused throughout society is inaccurate. Our minds are not rational in the liberal sense. We are conscious of only some of our minds' inner workings, and the unconscious processes in operation can powerfully bias our thinking. These unconscious processes produce belief bias; confirmation bias; cognitive dissonance reduction; affirmation, abstraction, accommodation, et cetera to reduce anxiety; intergroup bias; group polarization; memory biases; belief polarization; attitude inoculation; system justification; biased assimilation; framing effects; moral rationalization; and self-deception. Each of these can clearly be seen to skew our processing of political information in the media, swaying public opinion in irrational directions, and negatively affecting our political decisions as democratic citizens. As Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels conclude: *All the conventional defenses of [liberal] democratic government are at odds with demonstrable, centrally important facts of political life. One has to believe six impossible things before breakfast to take real comfort in any of them. Some of the standard defenses romanticize human nature, some mathematize it, and others bowdlerize it, but they all*

have one thing in common: They do not portray human beings realistically, nor take honest account of our human limitations.<sup>239</sup>

If we are ever to reap the benefits of a properly-functioning marketplace of ideas, our media systems must be geared to our actual psychology and not a liberal idealization of it.

Overall, however, it is hard to argue that the liberal ideal is not, in fact, *ideal*. If not the actual practice, the liberal democratic *ideal* has spread throughout the world;<sup>240</sup> and one force operating within the global information ecology that facilitated its spread surely was the egalitarian syndrome we evolved along with our eusociality. Just because the liberal democratic ideal seems a natural fit for a part of our psychology, however, does not mean that the ideal can actually be implemented. Our evolved biases and heuristics, along with the innate complexity of the human social system, pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy and its ability to produce successful policies.<sup>241</sup> Yet human history is itself a record of surmounting seemingly impossible challenges, starting with the emergence of eusociality in a species so different from the eusocial insects. The younger, optimistic Walter Lippmann had it right:

The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance. He is the creature of an evolution who can just about span a sufficient portion of reality to manage his survival, and snatch

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<sup>239</sup> Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): 306.

<sup>240</sup> Ronald Inglehart, "How Solid Is Mass Support for Democracy—And How Can We Measure It?" *Political Science and Politics* 36, no. 01 (2003).

<sup>241</sup> E.g., Friedman, *No Exit*.



what on the scale of time are but a few moments of insight and happiness. Yet this same creature has invented ways of seeing what no naked eye could see, of hearing what no ear could hear, of weighing immense masses and infinitesimal ones, of counting and separating more items than he can individually remember. He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach.<sup>242</sup>

In the absence of an alternative political system that can produce better results and win the allegiance of the world's people, it would seem for the moment (in keeping with our status quo-supporting bias) that our best option is to redesign our media systems to accommodate our minds' design. If we are to attempt to achieve the liberal ideal, we must design a functioning marketplace of ideas. True democracy cannot exist in its absence. Of course, it is clear that to do so would require a lot of work, and impinge upon the prerogatives of the vested interests who control the current media status quo. This makes such a redesign difficult – while still being possible. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton's quip about Christianity: the democratic ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and left untried. If we are tempted to shirk the difficulty, and accept the status quo, we must also accept that we have made liberal democracy into an impossibility, and embrace the fact that we are comfortable with a sham. Anything else would be self-deception.

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<sup>242</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 21.

## Chapter 4

### The Transition – Information from Media to Mind

*“Nothing appears more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.”*

- David Hume, *Of the First Principles of Government*

In the United States, the media has been called the fourth branch of government. This implies not only coequal status with the Congress, Executive, and Judiciary, but calls attention to the contrast: that the media is, in fact, not part of the government at all. Yet it exerts power *at least* coequal with the other branches, and perhaps more.<sup>243</sup> After all, the three official branches of government all rely, directly or indirectly, on favorable public opinion. Without it, few government officials can look forward to a long career in public service. And since the media is widely perceived to have disproportionate power over public opinion, it is no far leap to conclude that the media exerts power over the three “other” branches of government.

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<sup>243</sup> See, for instance, George C. Edwards and B. Dan Wood, "Who Influences Whom? The President, Congress, and the Media," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 02 (1999). The media was found to influence both the president and Congress, while Congress did not evince any influence over the president.

This is not supposed to be problematic. The media's role in democratic theory is to provide an unbiased source of information about public affairs, sharing both pure facts (empirical observations) and impassioned, partisan arguments with its audience. The media's audience – the rational citizen – then can make up its own mind about political questions, weighing arguments and assessing information to arrive at voting decisions. In this ideal conception, the media provides a marketplace of ideas to enrich the public sphere: everyone is free to offer and select whatever ideas they want in this metaphorical market. As such, the media's influence on public opinion, and via public opinion its influence on the government, is supposed to be benign. It is not supposed to shape public opinion so much as to inform it, and allow public opinion to shape itself.<sup>244</sup> The ideal media system acts like a stock exchange: not favoring any particular company over another, but merely creating a market and enforcing rules to ensure its smooth functioning.

This ideal conception describes reality only insofar as its starting assumptions hold. Problems – fundamental, worrying problems – begin at the moment these initial assumptions unravel. These assumptions include: a) that the media provides an unbiased selection of political information; b) that the media does not in any way pick winners or favorites from among the total of political perspectives; c) that the media's presentation of information does not make more likely any particular conclusion that could be drawn from it; and d) that the citizens using the media process information as close to the liberal ideal of rationality as possible. The last assumption was discussed in the previous chapter, and the first two will be covered in the next chapter; this one will focus on the third. To what

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<sup>244</sup> Olivia Newman calls the process of shaping preferences “soulcraft,” which is inimical to political liberalism (Newman 2015, xvii).

extent does the media influence public opinion, making some conclusions more likely than others; or does it serve as a neutral market-maker or impartial referee for the free flow of information and opinion?<sup>245</sup>

To answer that question, we will first briefly review the history of media research, followed by a discussion of some of its major paradigms, starting with cultivation theory. As cultivation theory proposes that the media exerts strong effects on people's beliefs, we will turn then to a discussion of how such effects might work on a micro level, followed by a more macro-level look at the psychology of persuasion. Then we will delve into priming, framing, and agenda-setting research, areas where great strides have been made in understanding exactly how the media exerts influence on public opinion. Next we will discuss evidence for strong, direct media effects, followed by a look at long-term dynamics like spirals of silence, ideological self-segregation, and the effects of the evolution of the U.S. media system over the past half-century. A discussion of what may need to be done to reshape the media system into a form better suited to successfully carrying out the normative role of the media in democracies will conclude.

### **i. What the media does**

*"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."*

- Attributed to Mark Twain and Josh Billings

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<sup>245</sup> If decades of research purporting to show "minimal effects" have not changed the general public's belief in the power of the media to shape public opinion and influence elections, then this chapter may be preaching to the choir (Mutz and Young, 2011, 1019).

Walter Lippmann began his 1922 classic *Public Opinion* with a story about an island in 1914 inhabited by a few English, French, and German citizens.<sup>246</sup> The island was so remote that news of the outside world came only once every 60 days, when a British mail steamer delivered newspapers from England, France, and Germany. In September of that year, the residents of this island were impatiently anticipating the arrival of the ship. They were eager to learn more juicy details about the Prime Minister of France and his wife, who was accused of murdering a reporter who had threatened to release details of their sex life. (Today, incidentally, the French press is known for relative discretion concerning the sexual proclivities of the country's leaders.) Instead, when the ship delivered the mail one day in mid-September, the island's residents learned that for the past six weeks – while the English, French, and German citizens of the island had been enjoying their lives as friends – their countries had begun a vicious and bloody war. For six weeks, without their knowledge and in blissful ignorance, the island's Germans had officially been enemies of the island's English and French residents.

Lippmann's story powerfully illustrates a fact of life that has not fundamentally changed since 1914: that in the main, we learn about the realm of politics from the media. Since information is physical, it has to be delivered from point to point somehow, whether by mail steamer, pony express, telegraph, radio, television, the internet, etc. While very few of us have any personal connection to leaders in our or any other government, a great many of us have a picture in our heads about what is going on in the world far outside our direct experience. And while the media may have minor assistants who add flourishes here and there – commentary and interpretation from acquaintances – it is without doubt the

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<sup>246</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 6.

mass media that paints the picture of the world we each carry around in our heads. We may have friends or family who communicate details about the situation in their home country or a foreign land they recently visited, but the majority of communication we receive about the far-flung world comes from the media. A Portuguese term for the media, *meios de comunicação*, illustrates this nicely: the mass media is merely another *means of communication* – but one that is predominant in communicating information about the political world. What separates the media from other means of communication humans engage in is its use of specific technologies (newsprint, radio, television, internet), and the institutions that comprise it.<sup>247</sup>

It is only through the media – large, fact-gathering, -interpreting, and -disseminating institutions using technologies to communicate simultaneously with massive numbers of people – that we learn about countless issues outside our direct experience. In fact, the only way large numbers of people *could* simultaneously learn about events and developments of a certain scope or distance from them is through the means of communication provided by the media:

To be sure, [we] are preoccupied first and foremost with the immediate concerns of private life: with earning a living, supporting a family, making and keeping friends. But at the same time, [we] also manage to decide whether huge federal deficits threaten the economy and whether fighting in Latin America threatens national security. [We] reach such judgments without benefit of direct experience: without undertaking [our] own economic analysis, without traveling behind the lines in Nicaragua. Because [we] take part in the grand events of politics so rarely, [we]

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<sup>247</sup> de Lima, *Mídia: Teoria*, 27.

must depend upon information and analysis provided by others – in modern times, upon information and analysis provided by mass media.<sup>248</sup>

Even when we do not receive political information directly from the media, we receive it indirectly through people we talk to – who themselves far more likely than not received it from the media.<sup>249</sup> Hence the considerable importance of the media to democracy: democracy requires a vibrant public sphere with debate and deliberation, and a vibrant public sphere requires an unbiased source of information and ideas to fuel debate and deliberation.<sup>250</sup>

These pictures-in-our-heads that Lippmann described are more pencil sketches than paintings. Public opinion is notoriously instable, and the pictures-in-our-heads of the political world are constantly having bits erased and redrawn by incoming communications from the media.<sup>251</sup> Not only that, but the full scope of the political world is so broad that the sketches the media provides can only ever be tiny bits and pieces of the total. And in selecting the bits and pieces to sketch, the media has the power not only to educate and inform, but to persuade and propagandize.<sup>252</sup>

The distinction between information and propaganda (in its pejorative sense) may seem highly relative – one’s “education” is another’s “propaganda” – but a line can be drawn to separate the two. Communication that seeks to manipulate a target through

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<sup>248</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 2.

<sup>249</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide* (New York: Longman, 1984): 1-3.

<sup>250</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>251</sup> Michael A. Milburn, *Persuasion and Politics: The Social Psychology of Public Opinion* (Pacific Grove CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 1991): 14-16.

<sup>252</sup> Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: Macmillan, 2001): 268-270.

prejudice and emotion to adopt the communicator's perspective is *propaganda*; communication that seeks to provide information for critical thinking leading to conclusions that may differ from the communicator's is *education*.<sup>253</sup> The philosopher Jason Stanley defines propaganda as political rhetoric, the attempt to sway others through emotion; as such, it can be beneficial or harmful.<sup>254</sup> More commonly, "propaganda" carries a negative connotation, as in what Stanley calls the classical sense – the "manipulation of the rational will to close off debate" – or propaganda as biased speech, which attempts to hide or omit certain options that should be considered.<sup>255</sup>

The stunning success of propaganda in the real world – whether the campaign to drum up support for the United States' entry into World War I, or World War II-era fascist propaganda in Germany, Italy, and Japan – spurred a lasting interest in studying how the media affects our minds. While propaganda in some form has existed since at least the birth of sedentary human civilization,<sup>256</sup> it has come into its own only with technologies of mass communication and institutions to utilize them: the media. Jacques Ellul noted that modern means of mass communication, and the event-focused nature of *the news*, are particularly well-suited to the designs of propagandists, making

the "current-events man" a ready target for propaganda. Indeed, such a man is highly sensitive to the influence of present-day currents; lacking landmarks, he follows all currents. He is unstable because he runs after what happened today; he related to the event, and therefore cannot resist any impulse coming from the event. Because he is immersed in current affairs, this man has a psychological weakness

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>254</sup> Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015): 4.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>256</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 11-12.



that puts him at the mercy of the propagandist. No confrontation ever occurs between the event and the person. Real information never concerns such a person.... Moreover there is a spontaneous defensive reaction in the individual against an excess of information and – to the extent that he clings (unconsciously) to the unity of his own person – against inconsistencies. The best defense here is to forget the preceding event.<sup>257</sup>

The current-event driven, mass-mediated *news* is congenitally weaker at providing education than it is at providing a ceaseless stream of events divorced from any synthesizing, explanatory narratives. This weakness makes it a tool well-suited for the propagandist.

Ellul broadened his focus beyond the news media proper to include what he called “sociological propaganda”: advertising, movies, magazines, education, and other social technologies and institutions that spread ideas.<sup>258</sup> In sociological propaganda, the direction of an intentional propagandist is unnecessary. Yet its effects are similar enough to the effects of political propaganda to make the rough equivalence apparent. Though less direct and more subtle, sociological propaganda can shape public attitudes and behavior, generating support and legitimacy for institutions, or cementing gender roles.<sup>259</sup> Examples of sociological propaganda are easy enough to recall: role models for proper male behavior on television, ideal body types for women in advertisements, public relations campaigns on

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<sup>257</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973): 47.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-66.

<sup>259</sup> Any technological or institutional manifestation of Pierre Bourdieu's “habitus” would be largely coterminous with Ellul's “sociological propaganda”; besides this, habitus also refers to human behaviors, artifacts, and expectations that reinforce a certain way of life.

behalf of corporations, and an educational system that explains the current system of social organization as basically just.

An archetypal example of combined sociological and political propaganda is the campaign begun in 1936 by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) to engineer public consent to a particular view of the capitalist economic system in the United States.<sup>260</sup> This campaign set out to soften the negative views of capitalism inspired by the Great Depression, and undermine the positive views of government intervention in the economy inspired by the New Deal.<sup>261</sup> NAM's campaign of sociological and political propaganda (comprising newspaper advertising, press releases, targeted publication, and speeches to civic organizations) was massively successful. A particularly stunning success was in turning U.S. opinion against the Office of Price Administration (OPA): before NAM's targeted campaign against the OPA and price controls in 1946, 85% of the country believed it to be vital. After the campaign, during that same year, only 26% thought so.

The power of the mass media looms larger the longer a society's experience with democratic, liberal, and parliamentary institutions. While more authoritarian societies can use the media as a blunt cudgel to keep people in line and ensure public support, in countries with longer democratic traditions, the media needs to be wielded more dexterously to guide public opinion in directions favored by the powerful. The United States, with its long history of democratic government, has arguably the greatest amount and most sophisticated political and sociological propaganda in the world.<sup>262</sup> This is a sobering, and threatening, thought. If public opinion is not freely formed, but is shaped and

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>261</sup> Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997): 24-35.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 12-16.

guided by an elite, then U.S. democracy is merely oligarchy with an extra step: oligarchs having to plug their preferred opinions into the masses.

This threatening prospect has provoked a reaction seeking to deny any such ability of the media to “plug in” ideas and preferences into the public sphere, and to reassure us that the media in fact has only minimal effects on public opinion. Frank Biocca explained that “[s]ince much of the underpinnings of our social system lie anchored in Enlightenment notions of reason ... it is no wonder that potential threats to this philosophy, and the claims to self-determination that it upholds, have been met with desperate resistance.”<sup>263</sup> Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld’s book of graphic non-fiction is an exemplary example of this defensive reaction.<sup>264</sup> Gladstone argues that the view in which the media powerfully influences public opinion is just the latest in a historical series of paranoid beliefs in a magical “influencing machine” capable of brainwashing people, and controlling their thoughts and actions. In her view, the media is no more than a reflection of ourselves: a market-driven institution seeking to attract consumers by offering to reinforce their previously-held, endogenously-formed beliefs.<sup>265</sup> Yet, even if we tend to select media

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<sup>263</sup> Frank A. Biocca, "Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory," *Communication Yearbook* 11, no. 648 (1988): 60.

<sup>264</sup> Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld. *The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011).

<sup>265</sup> Gladstone’s view of the relationship between the media and its audience shares much with the concept of the “active audience,” which, in contrast with a hypothesized “passive audience,” is proposed to have very little susceptibility to media influence. The “active audience,” however, does not allow us to avoid the conclusion that the media exert powerful influence, as Biocca makes clear:

We can see that the concept of active audience defined as cognitive independence, personal freedom, and imperviousness to influence appears strangely to be both bloated and seemingly anemic and thin. By attempting to cover everything the audience member does, it ends up specifying little and excluding nothing. Every twitch, every thought, every choice – both mindful and mindless – is recorded as evidence of “activity.” In some extreme formulations of the active-passive audience dichotomy, only a corpse propped in front of a television set could be registered as a member of the much scorned “passive audience.” But our audience is made of real human beings throbbing with life in a society that – thankfully – has not yet reached a point of psychic and social closure, a state of total determinism. Should we be surprised when, as social scientists, we behold perception, choice, reflection, and even selection? And if in the

congenial to our political beliefs, and the media attempts to attract us by offering viewpoints in accord with our own, does that mean that the media does not influence us? “[I]f in the shopping isles of media fare our active citizen chooses his or her banalities in pink, blue, or red boxes, should we pronounce them free, active, and ‘impervious to influence’?”<sup>266</sup>

Similar views were put forward in reaction to what was later described as the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory of media effects: the idea that the media could, without difficulty, insert information and opinions into the public mind. This idea arose from the terrifying success of WWII propaganda, but it ran into initial disconfirmation when propaganda films made for U.S. soldiers did not work as expected.<sup>267</sup> Subsequently, efforts to use psychoanalytic insights to create “magic bullets” for use in advertising and CIA programs also resulted in failure.<sup>268</sup> Studies pioneered by Paul Lazarsfeld and others at Columbia University instituted the “minimal effects” paradigm in the 1940s and ‘50s, which was believed to have replaced the “magic bullet” theory with the idea that the media does little more than reinforce previously-held views.<sup>269</sup>

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shopping isles of media fare our active citizen chooses his or her banalities in pink, blue, or red boxes, should we pronounce them free, active, and “impervious to influence”? (Biocca, 1988, 75)

<sup>266</sup> Biocca, “Opposing Conceptions,” 75.

<sup>267</sup> Carl I. Hovland et al., *Experiments on Mass Communication, Vol. 3* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1949). The results of these pathbreaking experiments have been misreported as having “failed rather spectacularly” (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010, 117). Rather, “[t]he films had no effects on items prepared for the purpose of measuring effects on the men’s motivation to serve as soldiers, which was considered the ultimate objective of the orientation program” – but “in nearly all cases opinion changes were found on questions related to main themes of the films”; and “whether a man was initially for or against the stand taken in the communication, his opinion tended to be influenced in the direction of *more acceptance* of the point of view argued for in the communication” (Hovland et al., 1949, 255, 69, 269). Hence these experiments were a spectacular failure only from the perspective of the military officials who had hoped for a persuasive result (motivation to serve) different from that intended by the film’s producers. However, they successfully influenced opinions on the topics and perspectives directly transmitted by the film.

<sup>268</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 23-28.

<sup>269</sup> It is, however, doubtful whether communication researchers ever seriously entertained a “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” hypothesis in the first place (Lubken, 2008).

Nonetheless, so-called “minimal effects” research did not support the hypothesis that the media has *no* effects, or that it merely reflected and reinforced media consumers’ previously-held opinions. Rather, it focused on factors that mediate, channel, or limit media effects (which are implicitly assumed to be always present). One example is the concept of opinion leaders: highly politically-interested individuals who spread information within their social networks. While opinion leaders are sometimes assumed to lessen the power of the media – after all, instead of getting all of our political information from the media, many of us get such information from opinion-leading friends and family instead<sup>270</sup> – they in fact amplify media effects by spreading mass communication messages to those who do not receive them directly from the media.<sup>271</sup> Having conversations about information presented by the news media not only helps further spread the information, but it has been found to be as effective in promoting news comprehension as media exposure itself.<sup>272</sup> Hence, not only pure information or disembodied “facts” are spread through conversations about the news, but commonly also the interpretation of those facts originally presented by the news media.

The minimal effects paradigm introduced important qualifications to any view of the media as an all-powerful influencing machine. Experiments in this tradition revealed that

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<sup>270</sup> A recent study of influences on voting choices found one’s social network to be of the greatest consequence, “not the modern mass media, which has often been ceded greater electoral significance” (Beck et al., 2002, 68). Yet the information transmitted from one’s social network did not spring *ex nihilo*, but overwhelmingly from the media. Research in the “diffusion of innovations” tradition comes to the same conclusion (Rogers, 2003, 74-81).

<sup>271</sup> Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, “Mass Communication, Personal Communication and Vote Choice: The Filter Hypothesis of Media Influence in Comparative Perspective,” *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 02 (2003); Gabriel Weimann, “Opinion Leadership and Public Opinion: Where Weak/Strong Media Paradigms Converge,” in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 161-168 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>272</sup> John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy, “Interpersonal Communication and News Comprehension,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1986).

mere exposure to a message could predict very little by way of outcomes or effects.

Exposure is surely a *sine qua non*, but in addition, a series of variable conditions affect the outcome a given media message will have. These conditions include differences in message structure, medium, form, and content; as well as differences between individuals receiving the message, the social context in which it is received, and individual selectivity in both choosing and interpreting media messages.<sup>273</sup>

Another important observation is that media effects may *seem* minimal at times, but only because media messages are heterogeneous, and can at times cancel each other out. Also, strong opinions are less susceptible to media influence – unlike weak opinions or opinions on novel issues.<sup>274</sup> From this, we may be misled into thinking the media is capable of only minimal effects. As John Zaller argues, the minimal effects "consensus sees the media as relatively incapable of pushing citizens around, as if people are either too savvy, or too insulated from mass communication, to let that happen. I see the media as extremely capable of pushing citizens around, and I maintain that the effects of the pushing around are hard to see only because the media often push in opposite directions."<sup>275</sup> Confirming Zaller's hypothesis, a study of viewers who primarily watched partisan channels (Fox and MSNBC) – rather than more balanced media sources that "push in opposite directions" – during the 2008 U.S. presidential election found significant media effects on their attitudes

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<sup>273</sup> Denis McQuail, "Paradigm Shifts in the Study of Media Effects," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 35-43. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>274</sup> Larry M. Bartels, "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 02 (1993): 275: "Attempting to study media impact in settings with very stable prior opinions is a social scientist's equivalent of attempting to count galaxies through the wrong end of a telescope."

<sup>275</sup> John Zaller, "The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived: New Support For a Discredited Idea," in *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*, ed. Diana C. Mutz et al., 17-78 (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996): 37-38.

toward the opposition candidate.<sup>276</sup> A study of exposure to partisan channels' coverage of the 2004 U.S. Democratic and Republican Party conventions found similar effects.<sup>277</sup> Even more noticeable effects on opinions and attitudes were found by focusing on *opinion* shows on partisan channels, rather than their *news* offerings: viewers of opinion shows on partisan channels like Fox and MSNBC showed dramatic effects on their individual attitudes.<sup>278</sup> Watching partisan opinion shows produces *direct* persuasion effects – even for liberals watching conservative shows and conservatives watching liberal shows.<sup>279</sup> Listening to partisan talk radio also produces persuasion effects; as an audience increases exposure to and reception of messages in partisan talk radio programs, their agreement with the positions advocated in the programs increases.<sup>280</sup>

It is important to note that research on media effects rarely if ever seeks to predict whether any particular individual is likely to be influenced by a media source. Rather, the media effects uncovered are population-level effects, which appear and are measured as changes in averages. This sort of research is more akin to cancer epidemiology than chemistry. Instead of generating near-certainties, like what will happen when two chemicals are mixed (or someone is exposed to a daily news show), they generate population-level predictions, like what percentage increase in cancer rates would be expected from a particular increase in radiation levels.

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<sup>276</sup> Glen Smith and Kathleen Searles, "Who Let the (Attack) Dogs Out? New Evidence for Partisan Media Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 78 no. 1 (2014).

<sup>277</sup> Jonathan S. Morris and Peter L. Francia, "Cable News, Public Opinion, and the 2004 Party Conventions," *Political Research Quarterly* 63 no. 4 (2009).

<sup>278</sup> Glen Smith and Kathleen Searles, "Fair and Balanced News or a Difference of Opinion? Why Opinion Shows Matter for Media Effects," *Political Research Quarterly* 66 no. 3 (2013).

<sup>279</sup> Lauren Feldman, "The Opinion Factor: The Effects of Opinionated News on Information Processing and Attitude Change," *Political Communication* 28, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>280</sup> Gangheong Lee and Joseph N. Cappella, "The Effects of Political Talk Radio on Political Attitude Formation: Exposure versus Knowledge," *Political Communication* 18, no. 4 (2001).

Recent research on the partisan media in the U.S. help flesh out precisely what direct effects this sort of news programming has, and on whom.<sup>281</sup> In a series of experimental studies, watching partisan opinion shows produced direct effects on political attitudes – but only for those forced to watch them. For experimental participants given the choice between opinion shows and entertainment programming – an experimental condition more closely mimicking real life – only those with high interest in politics chose to watch the opinion shows, and the shows did not significantly *change* their views, but merely reinforced them. These experiments seem to confirm the truism that “the direct effects of partisan news talk shows are limited to the people who actually tune in to them”<sup>282</sup> – which is an audience of only a few million in a country of over 300 million. However, another series of experiments provide an elaboration of these results. While partisan television reaches only a small audience comprising that minority of the U.S. population with both a good deal of political knowledge and relatively extreme partisan beliefs, when this audience is exposed to partisan programming, it makes their beliefs *more* extreme, makes them more convinced in the correctness of their beliefs, makes them less willing to trust the opposing party.<sup>283</sup> On issues for which viewers already have firmly-established opinions, partisan news merely reinforces such opinions – but for newly-emerging issues, partisan media plays a polarizing role, helping to establish extreme opinions among their partisan viewers.<sup>284</sup> Furthermore, the partisan media influences the

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<sup>281</sup> Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds Or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>282</sup> Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds*, 148.

<sup>283</sup> This result was also found in a study of exposure to rightwing radio programming (Jones, 2002).

<sup>284</sup> Levendusky, *How Partisan*, 139.



mainstream media agenda, which reaches far more people, and helps to polarize political elites, frustrating attempts at compromise and leading to gridlock.<sup>285</sup>

The minimal effects tradition has little to say on these and related questions about the overall power of the media, as it focused primarily on whether the broadcast media had short-term, persuasive effects during election campaigns.<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, the minimal effects paradigm emerged from research done in the 1940s and '50s, a time when the U.S. enjoyed a much stronger civil society with higher overall social cohesion, was far less of a "mass-mediated" society, and broadcast television had not yet been challenged by a proliferation of cable and satellite channels.<sup>287</sup>

Closely related to the fact that media messages can counteract one another, muting overall media effects, is a problem relating to "imaginability," part of the availability heuristic. Imaginability is a tendency to base judgments and choices on what alternatives we are able to imagine.<sup>288</sup> If we lack knowledge of, or the ability to imagine, a particular alternative or choice, then our choices will be biased in the direction of what we *do* know or *can* imagine. Robert Entman argues – in line with the theoretical perspective in the first chapter – that this means the media's power is not only in presenting persuasive messages, but also in omitting others: "[w]hile mass audiences can ignore any conclusion that bothers them and stick to their existing beliefs, it is harder for them to come up with an interpretation on their own, one for which the media do not make relevant information

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., (Levendusky, 148-156).

<sup>286</sup> Elihu Katz, "Communications Research since Lazarsfeld," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (1987).

<sup>287</sup> W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (2008): 707-708.

<sup>288</sup> Martha L. Cottam et al., *Introduction to Political Psychology, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010): 39-40.

readily available."<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, rationalizations for economic and political policies are all the stronger and more persuasive when they are not accompanied by any analyses that refute them.<sup>290</sup> This power of omission is all too apparent in the age of mass media: Not just the mere organization of a new party is becoming increasingly difficult – so is expression of a new political idea or doctrine. Ideas no longer exist except through the media of information. When the latter are in the hands of the existing parties, no truly revolutionary or new doctrine has any chance of expressing itself, *i.e.*, of existing. Yet innovation was one of the principal characteristics of democracy.<sup>291</sup>

## ii. Other media effects

Media messages about the political realm can cancel each other out, mute the effects of other messages, or, by failing to present another perspective or new idea, prevent its spread. If this seems counterintuitive, it *should* not. This is precisely the situation that obtains in another, perhaps more familiar area of media effects: advertising.

Practitioners of advertising and marketing would be a very hard sell for the “minimal effects” approach to media. Advertising had a humble role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, essentially providing simple price and product information to consumers (in the way that neoclassical economic theory still assumes obtains today). But by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, advertising began to resemble propaganda rather than price-and-product information, its effectiveness became widely acknowledged, and total advertising spending ballooned to 2% of GDP by 1920. From then until the present, total annual advertising expenditure has

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<sup>289</sup> Robert M. Entman, "How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach," *The Journal of Politics* 51, no. 02 (1989): 367.

<sup>290</sup> Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 65-66.

<sup>291</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 218.

averaged 2.2% of GDP, with current annual spending hovering around \$300 billion.<sup>292</sup> That is quite a price tag for a “minimal” effect.

A recent meta-analysis of studies of advertising on children and adolescents reveals that exposure to advertising results in more positive associations with the brands advertised, increased brand comprehension, and leads to selection of the products advertised.<sup>293</sup> The effects were small, but this is what would be expected in a market already saturated with advertising. (Also, 70% of consumers report skepticism about advertising, further reducing its effect.) A review of research on advertising to adults found mixed results, with similarly small effects.<sup>294</sup> These results might lead to questions about the viability of the \$300 billion-a-year advertising industry, but such doubts are answered in the same way as are doubts about the effects of media in the political realm: commercial messages, like political messages, often cancel each other out. But try to sell a new product without advertising – or a new political idea without media exposure – and the power of the media enters clearly into view. Maxwell McCombs summarizes this commonsense view: if the media did not “yield significant outcomes, the vast advertising industry would not exist.”<sup>295</sup>

Media violence and its link with real world aggression is another area of inquiry demonstrating more-than-minimal effects. In one provocative study, homicide rates were

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<sup>292</sup> Robert W. McChesney et al., “Advertising and the Genius of Commercial Propaganda,” in *The Propaganda Society: Promotional Culture and Politics in Global Context*, ed. Gerald Sussman, 27-44 (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>293</sup> Roger Desmond and Rod Carveth, “Advertising on Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis,” In *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 169-179 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>294</sup> Stefano DellaVigna and Matthew Gentzkow, “Persuasion: Empirical Evidence,” *Annual Review of Economics* 2, no. 1 (2010): 645-650.

<sup>295</sup> Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (New York: Polity Press, 2004): 47.

found to rise significantly on the third and fourth days after the nationally-televised broadcast of heavyweight championship boxing matches.<sup>296</sup> The number of homicides increased along with publicity for the fight; chillingly, even the race of the fight's loser correlated with the race of murder victims (if a Black male lost, more Black males were murdered; if a White male lost, more White males were murdered). A meta-analysis of studies on media violence and aggression found a small effect size that was nonetheless larger than that of the effects of condoms on HIV transmission, lead exposure on children's intelligence, and calcium intake on bone mass.<sup>297</sup> (A meta-meta-analysis found similar results.)<sup>298</sup> As a predictor of aggression, exposure to media violence was found to be of a comparable magnitude to factors such as alcohol use, corporal punishment on children, and the median sex difference between males and females.

Watching television news about traumatic events can cause effects similar to those from actually experiencing the traumatic events in person. Exposure to media coverage of the Iraq War and the 9/11 attacks was found to predict later symptoms of posttraumatic stress; in other words, the physical and psychological effects associated with *direct* exposure to trauma can also be caused by exposure to media coverage of traumatic events.<sup>299</sup> A study of exposure to media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings found

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<sup>296</sup> David P. Phillips, "Natural Experiments on the Effects of Mass Media Violence on Fatal Aggression: Strengths and Weaknesses of a New Approach," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 19, ed. Leonard Berkowitz, 207-250 (New York: Academic Press, 1986).

<sup>297</sup> P. Niels Christensen and Wendy Wood, "Effects of Media Violence on Viewers' Aggression in Unconstrained Social Interaction," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 145-168 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007). **However, for contrary results, see also** Christopher J. Ferguson and John Kilburn, "The Public Health Risks of Media Violence: A Meta-Analytic Review," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 154, no. 5 (2009).

<sup>298</sup> Media Violence Commission, and International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA), "Report of the Media Violence Commission," *Aggressive Behavior* 38, no. 5 (2012).

<sup>299</sup> Roxane Cohen Silver et al., "Mental-and Physical-Health Effects of Acute Exposure to Media Images of the September 11, 2001, Attacks and the Iraq War," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013).

that watching six or more hours daily one week after the event was associated with *higher* acute stress symptoms than having direct exposure to the bombings.<sup>300</sup>

The media has also been found to have significant effects in promoting positive, pro-social behavior as well. Meta-analyses have found significant effects of watching pro-social television content on children's behavior and attitudes,<sup>301</sup> and of media health campaigns on health-related behavior.<sup>302</sup> In post-genocide Rwanda, a radio drama promoting inter-ethnic reconciliation was found to change perceptions of social norms, including more positive views of intergroup marriage, trust between ethnic groups, and open dissent on sensitive topics.<sup>303</sup> In Senegal, a local media campaign against female genital cutting was successful at drastically reducing the practice.<sup>304</sup> Even the media coverage of Magic Johnson's 1991 announcement of his HIV-positive status was found in a meta-analysis to have had positive effects by increasing knowledge of HIV/AIDS, improving attitudes toward the HIV-positive, increasing the intention to avoid risky behaviors, and getting tested for HIV.<sup>305</sup> Although many pro-social media campaigns have failed to achieve the effects they were (poorly) designed for, media campaigns to reduce crime, stop smoking, and convince drinkers to use a designated driver have met with success.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> E. Alison Holman et al., "Media's Role in Broadcasting Acute Stress Following the Boston Marathon Bombings," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>301</sup> Marie-Louise Mares and Emory H. Woodard, "Positive Effects of Television on Children's Social Interaction: A Meta-Analysis," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 281-300 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>302</sup> Leslie B. Snyder, "Meta-Analyses of Mediated Health Campaigns," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 327-344. (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>303</sup> Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>304</sup> Armoudian, *Kill the Messenger*, 237-249.

<sup>305</sup> Mary K. Casey et al., "The Impact of Earvin 'Magic' Johnson's HIV-Positive Announcement," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 363-375 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>306</sup> Richard M. Perloff, *The Dynamics of Persuasion: Communication and Attitudes in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 336-354.

After this brief review, it should be clear that while the media does not act as a “hypodermic needle” painlessly injecting ideas and behaviors into the public, on the other hand, the hypothesis that the media has “minimal” effects is clearly unsupportable. As the editors of a collection of meta-analytic analyses of media effects concluded: “the argument that the impact of media on various social issues is miniscule is without foundation. The meta-analytic results indicate that the various forms of media demonstrate a consistent pattern of effect across a variety of domains...”<sup>307</sup> While the belief that the media exerts minimal effects is certainly comforting to our democratic ideals, the accumulated evidence no longer allows the theory any claim on viability.<sup>308</sup> Whether the media causes its effects directly, or through intermediaries like opinion leaders or behavior models, it still has significant effects – including on acculturation.<sup>309</sup>

Now that the question of whether the media has appreciable social effects is answered in the positive, does this confirm Dahl’s pessimistic conjecture that democracy with modern mass media is now substantially equivalent to totalitarianism? To even begin to respond, we first need to know *how* the media produces effects on public opinion. And then, in a later chapter, we will look at who can potentially “plug in” their preferences into the system – assuming such a thing is even possible.

### **iii. Broad effects: Cultivation theory**

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<sup>307</sup> Mike Allen and Raymond W. Preiss, “Media, Messages, and Meta-Analysis,” in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 15-30 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007): 28.

<sup>308</sup> Elisabeth Perse, “Meta-Analysis: Demonstrating the Power of Mass Communication,” in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 467-488 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>309</sup> Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 94-124 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009).

*"You're beginning to believe the illusions we're spinning here, you're beginning to believe that the tube is reality and your own lives are unreal! You do! Why, whatever the tube tells you: you dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube, you even think like the tube! This is mass madness, you maniacs! ... Television is not the truth! Television is a goddamned amusement park!"*

- "Howard Beale" in *Network*, written by Paddy Chayefsky

Long before there were so many nails in the coffin of the "minimal effects" paradigm – even while it was the dominant paradigm in the field – many researchers found it intuitively unsatisfying. One of the first alternate paradigms to be offered was cultivation theory. As its name suggests, cultivation theory proposes that the media has powerful effects on society, but they are exerted over the long term. There are no fast-moving magic bullets or quick injections from a hypodermic needle; instead, the media influences the public mind slowly, over time, by shaping the social environment we inhabit.<sup>310</sup> Cultivation theory proposes that the media affects political ideas not merely through journalism, but also through television programs, movies, books; in other words, through stories.<sup>311</sup> Even

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<sup>310</sup> Tae-Seop Lim and Sang Yeon Kim, "Many Faces of Media Effects," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, edited by Raymond W. Preiss et al., 315-325 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>311</sup> Some research has found effects of movies on political opinions (e.g., Baum, 2003, 2-3; Koopman et al., 2006; Pautz, 2015). Jeffrey Friedman has pointed out that political scientists should explore broader cultural influences on political opinions:

Whatever the advisability of the polity/society dichotomy, we should recognize that it is a mere conceptual construct. In reality, "political" actors are members of both their polities and their societies. If we want to understand their opinions, it is absurd to restrict our attention to influences that originate in the "political" realm, narrowly defined. Thus, if we are to pursue [an] ideational, epistemic agenda... it might be helpful to abandon political scientists' peculiar notion that "the news" is coextensive with the total "information" environment. Most children – even those who grow up to become journalists (or political activists, or even experts) – watch a lot less news than cartoons, movies, dramas, and comedies. They also read novels and they go to school, where they read (*inter alia*) textbooks. There is no reason to think that people's

though cultivation theory proposes a long-term, indirect form of media influence – a kind of propaganda without propagandists, exerting a constant gravitational pull – it is none the less powerful for it.<sup>312</sup> As the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher wrote, “If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation.”<sup>313</sup>

Reminiscent of Walter Lippmann’s anecdote about the Europeans living on a distant island, cultivation theory starts with a thought experiment:

Imagine a person living all alone on a tiny deserted isle ... with no contact with anyone or anything in the outside world besides what he or she sees on television. Everything this hypothetical hermit knows about ‘reality’ is derived from the television world – a world that differs sharply from the ‘real’ world in terms of demography, violence, occupations and so on, and a world in which motivations, outcomes, and many normally invisible forces of life and society are made clear. How would our recluse see the world? To what extent do heavy viewers see the world that way?<sup>314</sup>

This thought experiment prefigures much of the results of cultivation research. As expected, heavy viewers of television have beliefs about the real world that instead more closely match the world as portrayed on television. A meta-analysis of cultivation studies reveals a small, but significant effect of television exposure on opinions ranging from the

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developing political beliefs, even predispositions, are impervious to the ideas about society, human nature, and so on that are contained in these sources. (Friedman, 2012, 453-454)

<sup>312</sup> George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," *Mass Communication and Society* 1, no. 3-4 (1998).

<sup>313</sup> Quoted in James Shanahan and Michael Morgan, *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 13.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



prevalence of crime to sex and racial stereotypes.<sup>315</sup> The average “cultivation differential” – or the difference between how heavy and light television viewers perceive an aspect of the real world – was nearly ten percent. That is a significant difference, especially considering that the two groups do not live in hermetically-sealed domes; light viewers are likely to interact daily with heavy viewers, sharing ideas and influence.

This result makes perfect sense from the perspective of narrative research, which reveals that the human mind does not have a “toggle switch” to interpret fiction and nonfiction narratives differently.<sup>316</sup> If, as some psychologists believe, our minds have evolved to be best-suited to thinking in narrative form, then the massive number of fictional stories we see on television will over time powerfully affect our worldviews.<sup>317</sup> Heavy viewers of television unconsciously perceive the fictional narratives they watch as describing the real world they inhabit.<sup>318</sup> Experiments measuring reaction time to questions about the prevalence of crime in the real world show that heavy viewers respond faster – indicating that memories of fictional crimes seen on TV were highly accessible in memory and were being used to make judgments about the real world.<sup>319</sup> This same effect was found for heavy viewers of soap operas: they were able to more quickly access instances of (dramatized) crime in memory, leading them to estimate an unrealistically

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 110-136.

<sup>316</sup> Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993) 196-242.

<sup>317</sup> Shanahan and Morgan, *Television*, 193.

<sup>318</sup> Michael Morgan et al., “Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 34-49 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 40-41.

<sup>319</sup> L. J. Shrum, “Media Consumption and Perceptions of Social Reality: Effects and Underlying Processes,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 50-73 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 59.

high prevalence of crime.<sup>320</sup> (Accessibility in memory is only one pathway through which cultivation effects occur; in the soap opera study, heavy viewers overestimated the real world prevalence of marital discord, but this was not linked to memories of fictional marital problems.)

As a result, heavy viewers of television believe that crime is far more common and pervasive than it really is, and that in general the world is a mean and dangerous place. Compared to light viewers (who also have more realistic perceptions of crime and its occurrence), heavy viewers are more likely to believe that people cannot be trusted, and that everyone is primarily looking out for themselves.<sup>321</sup> The more likely one is to confuse fact with fiction, the more one is likely to view the real world as the world portrayed on television: mean and violent.<sup>322</sup> An alternative hypothesis is that people who view the world as mean and violent choose to watch more television to confirm their views; however, this explanation has been tested and rejected through a series of experiments.<sup>323</sup> Heavy viewers exhibit many more interesting differences from light viewers. Exposure to television is positively correlated with the development of materialistic values in both children<sup>324</sup> and adults<sup>325</sup> – particularly for adults with a high need for cognition, who pay close attention to what they view on television. (Materialism, incidentally, has been shown to lead to unhappiness in countries around the world.)<sup>326</sup> Exposure to gender stereotyping

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<sup>320</sup> L. J. Shrum, "Psychological Processes Underlying Cultivation Effects: Further Tests of Construct Accessibility," *Human Communication Research* 22, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>321</sup> Morgan et al., "Growing Up," 39.

<sup>322</sup> Shanahan and Morgan, *Television*, 186-188.

<sup>323</sup> L. J. Shrum et al., "The Effects of Television Consumption on Social Perceptions: The Use of Priming Procedures to Investigate Psychological Processes," *Journal of Consumer Research* 24, no. 4 (1998).

<sup>324</sup> Dale Kunkel et al., "Report of the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children" (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004): 30, 60; George P. Moschis and Roy L. Moore, "A Longitudinal Study of Television Advertising Effects," *Journal of Consumer Research* (1982).

<sup>325</sup> Shrum, "Media Consumption," 68.

<sup>326</sup> Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003).

on television increases sex-stereotypical behavior and attitudes.<sup>327</sup> Albert Bandura expands this list further, arguing that “many of the shared misconceptions about occupational pursuits, ethnic groups, minorities, the elderly, social and sex roles, and other aspects of life are at least partly cultivated through symbolic modeling of stereotypes” on television.<sup>328</sup> Such stereotypes can have direct political effects, like when television portrayals of successful ethnic minority characters lead to the conclusion that racism is no longer a problem, and that poor members of ethnic minorities must have only themselves to blame.<sup>329</sup> Heavy viewers were also more likely to be misinformed about the Gulf War, and to support the use of violence “for a good reason.”<sup>330</sup>

Cultivation research has revealed a particularly fascinating phenomenon about television’s effect on key political opinions and beliefs. Called “mainstreaming,” it refers to the fact that heavy viewers of television tend to hold homogenized political views. Compared to light viewers, heavy viewers in both higher and lower income brackets are more likely to consider themselves middle class, and more likely to designate themselves as moderate and middle-of-the-road in terms of politics.<sup>331</sup> On issues such as communism, busing, interracial relations, rights for women and sexual minorities, among others, heavy viewing generates a mainstreaming effect, pushing people closer to conservative positions. Heavy television viewing even reduces regional differences in ideology in the U.S., with heavy viewers’ outlooks converging on the conservative views of the South.<sup>332</sup> The

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<sup>327</sup> Patricia A. Oppliger, “Effects of Gender Stereotyping on Socialization,” in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 199-214 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>328</sup> Bandura, “Social Cognitive,” 107-108.

<sup>329</sup> Shanahan and Morgan, *Television*, 95-96.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>331</sup> George Gerbner et al., “Charting the Mainstream: Television’s Contributions to Political Orientations,” *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 2 (1982).

<sup>332</sup> Shanahan and Morgan, *Television*, 90-92.

mainstreaming effects of television are pervasive: “With political self-designation used as a control, one pattern emerged over and over: the attitudes of self-styled ‘moderates’ and ‘conservatives’ were barely distinguishable from each other, and from the ‘liberals’ who were heavy viewers. The only group “out” of the mainstream was the light-viewing liberals.”<sup>333</sup> Even sexual stereotypes are subject to the mainstreaming effects of heavy television viewing: girls who watch a lot of television at a young age tend to have more sexist attitudes when they are older, compared to girls who are light viewers. Hence, girls who would otherwise have no reason to adopt sexist attitudes about their own gender are cultivated by television viewing into accepting the gender stereotypes of the mainstream.<sup>334</sup> Evidence of political mainstreaming has also been found for Argentinian youth, with heavy viewers being more likely to agree with anti-democratic and authoritarian political positions.<sup>335</sup>

The mainstreaming phenomenon draws outliers toward the mass media-defined cultural and political center, and is more noticeable in groups further from the mainstream. This mainstream seems to be mostly conservative, although mainstreaming can operate in a leftward direction for groups far to the right of center.<sup>336</sup> This supports Murray Edelman’s observation that “[o]pinions about public policy do not spring immaculately or automatically into people’s minds; they are always placed there by the interpretations of those who can most consistently get their claims and manufactured cues publicized widely.”<sup>337</sup> Mainstreaming helps explain the volatility of public opinion over time: since

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 96-96.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 132, 158.

<sup>337</sup> Edelman, *The Politics*, 53.

media coverage of political issues serves as an ideological benchmark for citizens, changes in media consensus translate rather powerfully into changes in public opinion.<sup>338</sup>

The effects of cultivation can be uncovered in many ways, including outside of the cultivation research paradigm itself (where a “cultivation differential” is uncovered in the difference between beliefs and estimates of heavy and light television viewers). In a series of clever experiments, participants were presented with a subliminal flash of either the U.S. flag or a control image, immediately prior to a task involving filling in word fragments with letters to create complete words.<sup>339</sup> In the first study, the word fragments could be filled in to form words either related or unrelated to power. Those subliminally presented with the U.S. flag filled in more of the word fragments with letters creating power-related words; *but only for those who followed U.S. political news.* (These effects were found regardless of the participants’ political ideology.) A second experiment presented participants with the same subliminal stimulus, but asked them to rate high-power and low-power roles for their desirability. The result? Those who had been subliminally presented with the U.S. flag rated powerful roles as significantly more desirable, but only if they followed U.S. political news. A third experiment found the same pattern for materialistic attitudes (subliminal exposure to the flag along with U.S. political news exposure was linked to higher materialism), and a fourth experiment using word fragments that could be filled in to create aggression-related words found the same trend (subliminal exposure to the flag along with U.S. political news exposure was linked to higher aggression). In a fifth experiment, the effects of exposure to U.S. political news and the subliminal flag prime made participants more likely to interpret

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>339</sup> Melissa J. Ferguson et al., “On the Automaticity of Nationalist Ideology: The Case of the USA,” In *Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification*, ed. John T. Jost et al., 53-83 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

ambiguous behavior as being more aggressive. Lastly, in a sixth experiment, subjects were asked to look at a computer screen and answer whether the number of dots appearing on it was odd or even. (Again, for half of the participants, a U.S. flag was subliminally presented in between the dot displays.) After 80 trials, an error message was displayed, and the participants were informed that all data had been lost and they would have to start over. Although participants were consciously unaware of any changes in their mood, independent judges rated the reactions of those with high exposure to U.S. political news and exposure to the subliminal presentation of the flag as more hostile than the rest of the subjects. The experimenters interpreted these fascinating results as deriving first of all from subliminal exposure to the U.S. flag, which activated nationalist ideology in the minds of those subliminally exposed to it. But nationalist ideology took on a more aggressive, authoritarian, and materialistic hue only for those who regularly watch U.S. political news on television.

The conclusions of cultivation research dovetail nicely with the conclusions of Brazilian media researcher Venício de Lima, who warns of the long-term power of the media to construct reality by means of its representations of different aspects of human life. The majority of contemporary societies can be considered media-centered, which is to say, they are societies that depend on the media – more than the family, school, churches, unions, political parties, etc. – for constructing the public understanding that conditions the possibilities for everyday decisions by each of society’s members.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> de Lima, *Mídia: Teoria*, 117, my translation.

De Lima draws upon Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to elaborate his *Cenário de Representação da Política* (CR-P, "The Setting of Political Representation"). He defines the CR-P as "the specific space of political representations in contemporary 'representative democracies', constituted and constitutor, location and object of the articulation of total hegemony, constructed by long-term processes, in and by the media, overwhelmingly in and by television."<sup>341</sup> Gramsci's "hegemony" is encompassed and adopted in its entirety by de Lima's CR-P theory; what is added is an emphasis on the central role played by the media in constructing hegemony. The other ways through which hegemony is created (schools, institutions, etc.) are not ignored; they are merely outweighed by the power of the modern media to cement and unify hegemony in society. Television in particular exerts this power, by 1) creating a virtual proximity to events and experiences that viscerally *feels* real; 2) weakening the power of the written or spoken word through the power of the image, turning *homo sapiens* into *homo ocular*; 3) blurring the distinction between fiction and reality; 4) and exercising disproportionate control over the construction of culture itself.<sup>342</sup> Although audiences retain the power to interpret media messages in whichever way they desire, the power of the media to design the messages to be interpreted is certainly far greater. Media representations come to constitute reality itself.<sup>343</sup>

Many of de Lima's observations on the media in Brazil apply just as well to all contemporary media-centered societies: 1) the media occupies a position of centrality in society, permeating all areas of human activity, in particular the political sphere; 2) there is

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 186, my translation.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>343</sup> As another example of the effects of media entertainment, exposure to soap operas (or *telenovelas*) in Brazil has been found to increase divorce rates (Chong and La Ferrara, 2009) and lower birth rates (La Ferrara et al., 2012).

no such thing as a “national politics” without the media; 3) the media have taken over many of the social roles traditionally played by political parties, from channeling the demands of the public, to constructing the public agenda; 4) the media has radically altered electoral campaigns; and 5) the media has transformed into an important political actor in its own right.<sup>344</sup> At the same time, de Lima notes that “it is a common error to believe in the eternal omnipotence of the media.”<sup>345</sup> The power of the media is considerable and pervasive, but it is not an omnipotent “influencing machine.”<sup>346</sup> As the example of Brazil’s Lula demonstrates, even politicians largely despised by the media can win elections; civic organizations and the new electronic media can create a counter-hegemonic bloc to rival the power of the mainstream media.

This theoretical posture makes clear the necessity of rethinking the eternal controversy over the power and/or “effects” of the media. If the “representations” of the media are constitutors of reality (besides being constituted by it), the test of the

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 54-59.

<sup>345</sup> Venício A. de Lima, *Mídia: Crise Política e Poder no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2006): 62, translation mine.

<sup>346</sup> Manuel Castells explains:

To say that the media are the space of politics does not mean that television dictates what people decide, or that the ability to spend money on TV advertising or to manipulate images is, by itself, an overwhelming factor. All countries, and particularly the United States, are full of examples in which a television advertising barrage was not enough to elect a candidate, or a mediocre media performance did not preclude a candidate from winning (although examples also abound of the enhancing impact of TV presence in launching, and sustaining, a politician; for example, Ronald Reagan and Ross Perot in the United States, Felipe Gonzalez in Spain, Berlusconi in Italy, Jirinovsky in Russia in 1993, Aoshima in Tokyo in 1995, the late Pim Fortuyn in The Netherlands in 2002). In 1990s’ Brazil, Collor de Mello was elected president out of nowhere because of his masterful television performance, but people took to the streets to force his resignation once it became clear that he was a crook pillaging the state. Three years later, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, not unskillful on TV, but obviously disliking media gimmicks, was elected president because, as Finance Minister, he was able to subdue hyperinflation for the first time in decades, although the support of O Globo Televisao for his candidacy did help. And in 2002, Lula, the Brazilian left-wing leader, was elected president by a landslide vote, in spite of general support for his opponent by the mainstream media. Neither television nor other media determine political outcomes by themselves, precisely because media politics is a contradictory realm, where different actors and strategies are played out, with diverse skills, and with various outcomes, sometimes resulting in unexpected consequences. (Castells, 2011, 374-375)



power/effects of the media will have to be made on individuals' cognitive maps, which is to say, the manner by which people perceive and organize their immediate environment, their understanding of the world, and their orientation on certain topics; in other words, the test will have to be on the manner in which individuals construct their reality.<sup>347</sup>

How individuals draw their cognitive maps, perceive and organize their political environment, and construct their reality – and how, precisely, the media influences this process – is the question that must be answered.

#### **iv. Informing the mind: The micro level**

In order for us to draw our cognitive maps, we need ink; to construct reality, we need material; and, clearly, to organize our political environment, we need something to organize. In the realm of politics, this something out of which we construct our worldviews (or pictures-in-our-heads) is the information provided by the media. A 1934 experiment demonstrated this in simple fashion: college students were given two versions of the same college newspaper, one with a positive and the other with a negative editorial about a foreign politician few were likely to have any information whatsoever about.<sup>348</sup> When asked their opinions about the foreign politician, 98% of those who had read the favorable editorial thought positively about him, and 86% of those who read the unfavorable editorial thought negatively about him. This experiment illustrates a clear truism: if the media is our only source of information about something, the media will powerfully influence our opinions of that something.

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<sup>347</sup> de Lima, *Mídia: Teoria*, 190-191, translation mine.

<sup>348</sup> Albert D. Annis and Norman C. Meier, "The Induction of Opinion through Suggestion by Means of 'Planted Content'." *The Journal of Social Psychology* 5, no. 1 (1934).

“In contemporary societies people receive their information, and form their political opinion, essentially through the media, and fundamentally from television.”<sup>349</sup> Even as children, when we are first developing our political orientations, the news media is an influential source of political information; children exposed to more news media have more awareness of politics and political issues.<sup>350</sup> The direction of causality is clear: those with more political knowledge do not simply discuss politics more often and consume more news media; instead, those who discuss politics more often and consume more news media thereby gain more political knowledge.<sup>351</sup> No matter what our values happen to be, in order to translate them into political positions – support for a policy or candidate – we need contextual information from the media for the translation.<sup>352</sup> The disconcerting nature of this fact makes it no less true.

Media dependency theory points out that the size and scope of media effects depend on our needs for information, and how we use the media to satisfy them.<sup>353</sup> For those who avoid politics altogether, the news media is unlikely to exert any noticeable effects. For those who are interested in politics, or feel it is a democratic citizen’s duty to be informed about politics, media effects are significant.<sup>354</sup> After all, from what other source can our information about politics ultimately come? In earlier centuries, schools, churches, and

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<sup>349</sup> Castells, *The Power*, 371. Some studies, however, find that newspapers are more effective at transmitting political information than television. (Druckman 2005)

<sup>350</sup> Jan W. van Deth et al., "Children and Politics: An Empirical Reassessment of Early Political Socialization," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>351</sup> William P. Eveland Jr, et al., "Understanding the Relationship between Communication and Political Knowledge: A Model Comparison Approach Using Panel Data," *Political Communication* 22, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>352</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 25.

<sup>353</sup> Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects," *Communication Research* 3, no. 1 (1976).

<sup>354</sup> Debra Merskin, "Media Dependency Theory: Origins and Directions," in *Mass Media, Social Control and Social Change: A Macrosocial Perspective*, ed. David Demers and Kasisomayajula Viswanath, 77-98 (Iowa City: Iowa State University Press, 1999).

books (for the literate few) were the predominant source of information about the outside world; today, the news media has largely supplanted them, and offers an unprecedented amount of information for those who are interested. While we may attempt to evade the fact of our deep reliance on the media, Kathleen Taylor reminds us that “[u]ncritical reliance on media sources is a necessity. We simply do not have the resources to check every statement for ourselves, and so we either trust or, if trust is challenged, react with a blanket cynicism which is often no more than skin deep (in practice, disbelieving *everything* would simply incapacitate us).”<sup>355</sup>

To explain how information is organized on a micro level, media researchers have turned to the schema concept in psychology.<sup>356</sup> Schemas are stored in long-term memory, which is organized in associative networks of meaning. Similar schemas are linked together with ties of varying strength, and many may contain not only information but also an emotional, affective tag.<sup>357</sup> The emotional response attached to a schema can affect future information searches: if we read a piece of news that provokes anxiety, for instance, we are more likely to search for additional information on it, to become more knowledgeable and quell our anxiety.<sup>358</sup>

Bits of information from the media are organized into schemas, and individual schemas (like the amount of national debt) are themselves organized into larger structures

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<sup>355</sup> Taylor, *Brainwashing*, 227.

<sup>356</sup> Maxwell McCombs et al., *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effects on Civic Life* (New York: Polity, 2011): 96. Others have referenced meme theory – which is less psychological, and more at home with evolutionary and information theory. As described in the first chapter, schemas and memes are theoretical constructs that share a great degree of overlap. (Hauser, 2014, 171)

<sup>357</sup> Charles S. Taber, "Information Processing and Public Opinion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears et al., 443-476 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>358</sup> Michael B. MacKuen et al., "Affective Signatures and Attention: The Persistent Impact of Emotional Responses to the News" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 11-14, 2013).

(like a narrative explaining how government spending is believed to affect the economy); and these larger structures of organized information affect the way we comprehend incoming information.<sup>359</sup> These structures of schemas differ from person to person and group to group, shaping our worldviews and the way we conceptualize the political realm in general.<sup>360</sup> Common political schemas come in the form of issues, groups (like class, ethnicity), ideologies, and political parties; and these schematic organizations have been found to help people more accurately analyze relevant information.<sup>361</sup> Those whose self-schemas (ideas about themselves, describing who they are) attach a high importance to politics, are able to process new political information more quickly than those for whom politics is not as central a part of their self-image.<sup>362</sup> Political experts, with many highly-organized schemas, are able to store information in larger chunks. As new information is absorbed, they are better able to incorporate it into existing schemas, helping them to better remember that information later.<sup>363</sup> For instance, one experiment demonstrated that learning about political candidates' scandals did not *displace* policy-related information; rather, the scandal information was assimilated into overall schemas about the candidate, in the process *strengthening* overall memory about the candidate.<sup>364</sup> This helps explain the knowledge-gap phenomena, whereby the knowledge-rich get richer and the knowledge-

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<sup>359</sup> David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., "Media Priming: An Updated Synthesis," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 74-93 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 84-87.

<sup>360</sup> Cottam et al., *Introduction*, 152.

<sup>361</sup> Michael A. Milburn, *Persuasion and Politics: The Social Psychology of Public Opinion* (Pacific Grove CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 1991): 75-77.

<sup>362</sup> Lauren E. Duncan, "Personal Political Salience as a Self-Schema: Consequences for Political Information Processing," *Political Psychology* 26, no. 6 (2005).

<sup>363</sup> Michael R. DeWitt et al., "The Effects of Prior Knowledge on the Encoding of Episodic Contextual Details," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 19, no. 2 (2012); Milburn, *Persuasion*, 79-80.

<sup>364</sup> Beth Miller, "The Effects of Scandalous Information on Recall of Policy-Related Information," *Political Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2010).

poor stay poor. Like a ball of snow rolled down a hill, well-developed schemas are better able to accommodate new information, until they reach a saturation point where there is little else to add.<sup>365</sup>

Our existing political schemas powerfully affect the process of absorbing new information from the media. For instance, influential media frames may produce their effects through activating widely-shared and highly-developed schemas (like social representations).<sup>366</sup> Doris Graber explains that “[s]ince schemas become guides to information selection, the dimensions that they exclude are apt to be ignored in subsequent information processing. Hence, the odds favor schema maintenance over schema growth or creation of new schemas.”<sup>367</sup> It is easier to modify incoming information to make it fit with our previously-held ideas and beliefs, rather than to modify our previously-held ideas and beliefs to fit with incoming information. Experimental results show that, for instance, stories about economic *failures* in poor countries were processed more readily than stories about economic *successes*.<sup>368</sup>

Schemas based on personal experience or from trusted sources are particularly difficult to change. Likewise, schemas that are highly interrelated with other schemas are resistant to change, as a change in one would require a change in related schemas. Also, the less education one has, and the closer a given schema is related to our self-esteem (e.g., a belief that our nation is intrinsically good), the harder it is to modify or replace our schemas.<sup>369</sup> “Society, therefore, may depend for timely changes on people who take

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<sup>365</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 116-117.

<sup>366</sup> Baldwin Van Gorp, "The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back in," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>367</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 149.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

idiosyncratic views of reality and who are willing to form and propound schemas that diverge widely from cultural norms”<sup>370</sup> – assuming, of course, that such nonconformists can get their views into the media.

[T]here are distinct limitations to the media’ power to influence schemas. But these limitations should not be overemphasized. For many areas of public life, average Americans are totally dependent on media information. There simply are no other sources to acquire information. The information provided by the media may be suspect and conflicting, but, in the end, the individual must form schemas from whatever is presented. There is little opportunity for gaining different insights or verifying the accuracy of available information and interpretations.<sup>371</sup>

This poses an obvious problem for maintaining accurate knowledge about a changing world: adding radically new information, or changing existing schemas, is a difficult task. This difficulty is such that people have been found to be more likely to lend support to a war, if they view opposition to the war as entailing the admission that their country had made a mistake.<sup>372</sup> Having to modify a schema of one’s country as basically good is felt to be too hard, making even support for a *war* seem the easier option. On the positive side, having a large stock of well-developed schemas makes one more difficult to persuade by propagandistic tricks. The knowledgeable are likely to evaluate arguments carefully, while those lacking knowledge are more likely to be swayed by fundamentally weak arguments using sly persuasive techniques.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>372</sup> Zaller, *The Nature*, 33.

<sup>373</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 141.

Misinformation is not merely an issue at the time of printing or broadcast, a momentary problem that can be fixed by a retraction later. Instead, misinformation can persist, and continue to be believed in, even after a retraction – particularly when such misinformation is congruent with preexisting attitudes and beliefs.<sup>374</sup> Because preexisting attitudes and beliefs make up one’s worldview – a structure of schemas – it is easy to see how inconsistent schemas would be difficult to accept and incorporate, even inconsistent schemas that attempt to correct for misinformation. One of the few successful ways to correct misinformation requires that one’s existing worldview be reaffirmed, and the correction be tailored to be worldview-consistent.<sup>375</sup> Other ways include having the correction come from a source sharing one’s worldview, or being exposed to the correction after feeling self-affirmation: like recalling a time when one acted in accord with one’s basic values.<sup>376</sup> Overall, however, correcting misinformation runs into strong psychological barriers. Furthermore, misinformation spread through emailed rumors exhibits a strong feedback loop, whereby the more political rumors one receives by email the more likely one is to believe them and email them to others.<sup>377</sup> Hence the persistence and spread of beliefs like that the centrist President Obama is a Kenyan-born, radical anti-colonialist, socialist Muslim.

Even accurate information can be transformed into misinformation due to the pull of existing schemas. For instance, for a person with strong schemas connecting fraud with

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<sup>374</sup> Ullrich K.H. Ecker et al., "Do People Keep Believing Because They Want to? Preexisting Attitudes and the Continued Influence of Misinformation," *Memory & Cognition* 42, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>375</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "Misinformation and Its Correction Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>376</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict: From Iraq and the "War on Terror" to Future Threats to Peace," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013).

<sup>377</sup> R. Kelly Garrett, "Troubling Consequences of Online Political Rumoring," *Human Communication Research* 37, no. 2 (2011).

the poor rather than the rich, a news story about Medicaid fraud by *providers* is easily misremembered as a story about Medicaid fraud by the *recipients*.<sup>378</sup> News stories about unobtrusive issues, like people and politics in foreign countries, are especially susceptible to being misinterpreted through the influence of existing schemas.

Even basic evolutionary psychological features of our minds can affect schema change. Our aversive (“tiger – run!”) and appetitive (“chocolate cake - mmm!”) systems can influence our reception of information.<sup>379</sup> When media messages do not arouse our aversive system (that is, they do not seem to be warning us of dangers), then we tend to pay more attention to positive information than negative information – we are led by our appetitive system to focus on good news. On the other hand, when messages weakly arouse our aversive system, we tend to pay more attention to negative information. The problem is, when bad news strongly arouses our aversive system – when we are informed of a very dangerous development – our aversive system kicks into “flight” mode, and reduces our ability to process the bad news. Meanwhile, our appetitive system remains in operation, looking for whatever silver linings we can possibly find in the clouds. The danger here is, of course, that our minds are impeded from accepting important information about very serious problems, at the same time that our minds are spurred into searching for an “out”: some piece of good news that can allay our concerns. News about the threats posed by global warming, for instance, may be subject to this maladaptive psychological tendency. Another major factor influencing the likelihood of fundamental change at the level of schemas is personality. While humans broadly share an evolved psychology adapted to the

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<sup>378</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 133.

<sup>379</sup> Annie Lang et al., “Where Psychophysiology Meets the Media: Taking the Effects Out of Mass Media Research,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 185-206 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 199.



environment in which our species emerged, this shared psychology is very sensitive to our environment. Two people growing up in different social environments will develop distinct personalities. On top of this, there is heritable variation between individuals, variation linked not only to environmental impact on development, but to a unique genetic endowment.<sup>380</sup> Some basic personality differences exist at the gender level: sociopolitical attitudes of men tend to be more “hierarchy-enhancing,” while those of women tend to be “hierarchy-attenuating.” Studies of mean differences between the sexes show that males tend to be more militaristic, ethnocentric, xenophobic, anti-egalitarian, punitive, and in favor of the predatory exploitation of outgroups, compared to women.<sup>381</sup> Personality variables including need for cognition, self-monitoring, and dogmatism also powerfully influence whether new information is accepted or rejected.<sup>382</sup> Those with a high need for cognition are more likely to entertain new information; high self-monitors are more susceptible to social pressure, and are more likely to accept popular versus unpopular ideas; and dogmatic personalities are unlikely to change their minds in the face of disconfirming evidence.

Variation in personality overlaps somewhat with political ideology. In fact, acceptance of leftwing or rightwing ideology may partially be the expression of personality variables: those with a greater openness to experience<sup>383</sup> and need for creativity tend toward the left, while those with a greater need for certainty, regularity, and authority tend

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<sup>380</sup> Anthony C. Lopez and Rose McDermott, "Adaptation, Heritability, and the Emergence of Evolutionary Political Science," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>381</sup> Jim Sidanius and Robert Kurzban, "Evolutionary Approaches to Political Psychology," in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears et al., 146-181 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 166-167.

<sup>382</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 224-234.

<sup>383</sup> Personal political salience – the importance of politics to one’s self-schema – may also be tied to the personality variable of openness to experience (Duncan, 2005, 974).

toward the right.<sup>384</sup> Authoritarianism, for instance, is far more prevalent on the right of the political spectrum.<sup>385</sup> Furthermore, both those low and high in authoritarianism tend to hold beliefs about factual reality that accord with their respective ideologies; however, those high in authoritarianism are particularly prone to believing that *their* ideology is supported by facts, making their beliefs more resistant to factual challenge.<sup>386</sup> Such personality variables may affect the kinds of information one is likely to accept, and which are likely to be rejected.

#### **v. The bigger picture: How does the media change minds?**

Given how sticky schemas can be once in place, could it be that the media does not *change* minds so much as it shapes and molds them? Cultivation research certainly demonstrates the latter, at least. And John Zaller's investigation of media effects on public opinion revealed that the most prevalent (if not the only) sort of change the media provokes is change from having little information on a topic, to adopting the information or opinion provided on that topic by the media.<sup>387</sup> Those who are already well-informed on a topic are far less likely to change their opinion in the face of media messages. And the idea that interpersonal conversations can somehow supplant the media as a source of political information seems nothing but a mirage.<sup>388</sup> Knowing that the media provides the only path to political information for most people is one thing; whether people take that path, or accept what they find while on it, is another story. As Bandura put it, "[a]lthough structural

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<sup>384</sup> Jost et al., "Political Conservatism"; Milburn, *Persuasion*, 51.

<sup>385</sup> Milburn, *Persuasion*, 45-49.

<sup>386</sup> Mirels and Dean, "Right-wing Authoritarianism."

<sup>387</sup> Zaller, *The Nature*.

<sup>388</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 37, 86.

interconnectedness provides potential diffusion paths, psycho-social factors largely determine the fate of what diffuses through those paths.”<sup>389</sup>

What, then, are the psycho-social factors that determine the fate of the information flowing from the media? One such factor would be bedrock ideas, or basic beliefs, shared by nearly all members of a given society:

Such beliefs have the quality of political religion, learned early in childhood and never questioned. New information is processed so that it accords with these beliefs and contrary evidence is not generally permitted to undermine their strengths. Because these beliefs are so widely shared and constantly reinforced, they “may account for the mysterious processes in which large numbers of individuals seem to think and act in similar ways.”<sup>390</sup>

Similar to basic beliefs, strongly-held opinions are also notoriously difficult to change, and can only be argued around rather than against.<sup>391</sup> Such strongly-held opinions are usually susceptible to change when a persuasive message presents a position already fairly close to the original opinion; only when our opinions are moderate and not strongly held do persuasive messages considerably divergent from our opinions show any strong success.<sup>392</sup> Many strongly-held opinions may be transmitted from parents to children, a common and durable means of information transmission.<sup>393</sup> And while the opinions of others in our social network even beyond our families usually exert influence on our own opinions, when

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<sup>389</sup> Bandura, “Social Cognitive,” 119.

<sup>390</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 55 (quoting Bennett, 1981, 131).

<sup>391</sup> Perloff, “The Dynamics,” 146.

<sup>392</sup> James O. Whittaker, “Cognitive Dissonance and the Effectiveness of Persuasive Communications,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (1964).

<sup>393</sup> David O. Sears and Sheri Levy, “Childhood and Adult Political Development,” In *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears et al., 60-109. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 77.

we perceive an issue to be a *moral* issue, our resistance to persuasion is heightened.<sup>394</sup>

Importantly, media coverage can affect whether or not we think about an issue in moral terms.<sup>395</sup>

In the presence of basic beliefs and strongly-held opinions, potentially-conflicting information can only be accepted by one of a few maneuvers. We can either deny the inconsistency; bolster one of the inconsistent ideas in a way that makes it seem consistent with our opinion; differentiate inconsistent ideas by splitting one of them up into consistent and inconsistent parts; or transcend the conflict by embedding the inconsistent ideas within a larger explanatory structure that accommodates and resolves the conflict.<sup>396</sup>

Another factor would be skepticism; keeping a critical eye on media messages and reserving judgment is a strategy which, if widely used, would serve as a filter limiting the amount of information absorbed from the media.<sup>397</sup> As discussed below, skepticism is a major mediator of the media's effects. Development over the life cycle may also cause variation in terms of openness to new ideas, with the young and old being more likely to adopt new ideas, as well as those who migrate to a location with a different attitudinal environment.<sup>398</sup>

The most well-developed theory of persuasion describing the psycho-social factors determining acceptance of media messages is the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM). The ELM proposes that there are two routes to persuasion: the central

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<sup>394</sup> Pazit Ben-Nun Bloom and Lindsey Clark Levitan, "We're Closer than I Thought: Social Network Heterogeneity, Morality, and Political Persuasion," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>395</sup> David Domke et al., "Rights and Morals, Issues, and Candidate Integrity: Insights into the Role of the News Media," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>396</sup> Milburn, *Persuasion*, 96-97.

<sup>397</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 76-78.

<sup>398</sup> Sears and Levy, "Childhood and Adult," 84, 88.

route involves motivated, effortful, elaborate thought drawing upon currently-held knowledge to evaluate an incoming message; the peripheral route, on the other hand, does not require much thought, motivation, or elaboration, and relies on simple heuristics (like the mere number of arguments in a message) and cues (like speaker attractiveness or apparent expertise) to determine acceptance or rejection of incoming messages.<sup>399</sup> Persuasion that occurs through the central route is incorporated into one's schematic structures, stable over time, and resistant to change; persuasion through the peripheral route is less stable and more likely to be changed by future arguments. As the personal relevance of a message increases, so too does the likelihood of using central route processes to evaluate it. Greater personal relevance, hence careful, central-route processing, can be activated when speakers evoke values shared by an audience.<sup>400</sup> When personally-relevant messages are processed centrally, only strong arguments result in persuasion; but when messages of low personal relevance are processed peripherally, even weak arguments can result in persuasion. Need for cognition, a personality variable, and knowledge on the topic of the incoming message are other factors that increase the likelihood that we will use the central route.<sup>401</sup> Distraction is another key determinant: if we are distracted during a message, this reduces the amount of elaboration we can apply, making peripheral processing more likely. The graphics-heavy and soundbite-focused nature of much television news broadcasting suggests that peripheral route processing is

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<sup>399</sup> Richard E. Petty et al., "Mass Media Attitude Change: Implications of the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 125-164 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009).

<sup>400</sup> Thomas E. Nelson and Jennifer Garst, "Values-based Political Messages and Persuasion: Relationships among Speaker, Recipient, and Evoked Values," *Political Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>401</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 140-141.

applied to much of the information it transmits.<sup>402</sup> Richard Perloff explains that when people are processing information peripherally, they are susceptible to slick persuaders—and can be thus characterized by the saying attributed to P. T. Barnum: “There’s a sucker born every minute!” In other circumstances (when processing centrally), individuals are akin to Plato’s ideal students—seeking truth and dutifully considering logical arguments—or to Aristotelian thinkers, persuaded only by cogent arguments (logos). The model says people are neither suckers nor deep thinkers. Complex creatures that we are, we are both peripheral and central, heuristic and systematic, processors. The critical questions are when people process centrally, when they prefer the peripheral pathway, and the implications for persuasion.<sup>403</sup>

Clearly, the danger here is that political messages from the media may be processed peripherally, making us accept arguments that we never would have had we processed them via the central route – thereby making us, for a moment at least, one of Barnum’s suckers. The peripheral route is low-hanging fruit for persuaders, propagandists, advertisers, and other flim-flam men; it makes us vulnerable to craftily-packaged messages preying on our distracted, busy minds. This is particularly worrisome for politics; and there is evidence, for instance, that candidate evaluations are often based on peripheral processing, using ideological cues that are largely symbolic rather than issue-oriented.<sup>404</sup>

Another factor increasing the likelihood of elaboration, hence central route processing, is a perceived intent to persuade on the part of a communicator. Since an at-

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<sup>402</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 187.

<sup>403</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 135.

<sup>404</sup> Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, “The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications,” in *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius, 200-216 (New York: Psychology Press, 2004): 213-214.

least-normative part of journalism is attempted objectivity, this is one factor (among others) lessening the likelihood of elaboration, making peripheral route processing more likely. Attractive news anchors and seemingly-expert guests on television news are other factors pushing toward peripheral route processing. (The conscious intuition here may be, “if they are on the news, they must be experts who know what they are talking about.”) Plus, decreasing levels of interest in politics means less motivation to learn about politics, decreasing the likelihood of elaboration, and again making peripheral processing more likely – a proposition for which there is evidence.<sup>405</sup> Finally, as news broadcasts face stiff competition from entertainment programming and the internet, media companies have attempted to make the news more entertaining to increase viewership; and the evidence strongly suggests that more dramatic presentations actually do a poorer job of informing the audience.<sup>406</sup> The peripheral route has its perils.

#### **vi. Models of media influence: Priming**

A common refrain about the results of media effects research is that while the media may not be good at telling people exactly *what to think*, it is very successful at telling them *what to think about*. A review of priming, agenda setting, and framing research will demonstrate just how thin the line between the two is.

Priming is defined as the ability of the media to call attention to some matters while ignoring others, thereby influencing the standards by which political matters and actors are judged.<sup>407</sup> It is important to clarify that priming in this context differs from priming in

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<sup>405</sup> Milburn, *Persuasion*, 129.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-150.

<sup>407</sup> Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 63.

the sense used by cognitive and social psychologists; in the latter sense, priming is like a reminder that temporarily increases the accessibility of a concept in memory, and dissipates quickly.<sup>408</sup> In the media context, priming is a phenomenon that lasts much longer (up to several weeks) by increasing *chronic* accessibility of concepts – much like in cultivation theory.<sup>409</sup>

Media priming occurs when news stories focus on a particular issue, and tie that issue to another issue or to a politician, leading viewers or readers to judge the politician or second issue on the basis of the primed issue. For instance, television news coverage of a president's handling of foreign affairs will prime viewers to judge the president's overall performance on the basis of foreign affairs. Priming is unlikely to determine the *only* issue or issues to be used in making such determinations, but it will introduce covered issues into the mix. Furthermore, entertainment programming can act as political primes, and priming can effect evaluations of politicians other than presidents.<sup>410</sup> Iyengar and Kinder's experiments revealed two sides to priming effects: they lead television viewers to be more certain about a politician's performance on an issue, and to attach greater importance to that performance in evaluating the politician overall.<sup>411</sup> Unlike other media effects, priming effects are pervasive among the knowledgeable and the ignorant, among political junkies and the apathetic alike.<sup>412</sup> Priming's power lies not in directly manipulating political beliefs; but in manipulating the bases of political judgments, leading to changes in beliefs on the issues or politicians being judged.<sup>413</sup> (However, when we lack strong beliefs or much

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<sup>408</sup> Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., "Media Priming," 60.

<sup>409</sup> Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., "Media Priming: An Updated," 83.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>411</sup> Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 87-89.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 114.



knowledge about an issue, media messages have little to prime – and may instead exert direct influence on opinions.)<sup>414</sup>

Priming is the key component of what is called “attribute agenda setting.” Like priming, attribute agenda setting influences how and what people think about topics by focusing on some attributes of the topic while ignoring others. By priming or focusing attention on negative or positive aspects of a policy or politician, the media can powerfully influence people to reject or support that policy or politician. This effect has been found in operation in countries as diverse as the U.S., Spain, and South Korea.<sup>415</sup> Priming in the “attribute agenda setting” context can be especially pernicious, as it can narrow the range of possible solutions to political problems, making *the* solution seem to be only that which has been offered in the media.<sup>416</sup>

A meta-analysis of 48 priming experiments and surveys involving 21,087 participants found a small but significant effect of media primes (with a larger effect for experimental than survey research).<sup>417</sup> As Maxwell McCombs concludes, the “mass media’s causal influence on the pictures in our heads about political candidates [and issues] is well documented.”<sup>418</sup>

## **vii. Models of media influence: Framing**

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<sup>414</sup> Michael Tesler, “Priming Predispositions and Changing Policy Positions: An Account of When Mass Opinion Is Primed or Changed,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 4 (2015).

<sup>415</sup> Sei-Hill Kim et al., “Attribute Agenda Setting, Priming and the Media’s Influence on How to Think about a Controversial Issue,” *International Communication Gazette* 74, no. 1 (2012); McCombs et al., *The News*, 86.

<sup>416</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 79-80.

<sup>417</sup> Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., “Media Priming.”

<sup>418</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 78.

Media framing is the process by which facts are packaged into a narrative. For instance, a news story may contain facts like “house prices have fallen by 25%,” “subprime mortgages are defaulting at an unprecedented rate,” “subprime-mortgage backed securities have lost nearly all of their value,” and “GDP has shrunk by one percent over the past year.” Framing is the process of tying these facts together into a comprehensible narrative: “A frenzy of housing speculation has gone into reverse, forcing house prices to fall by 25% and subprime mortgages to default at an unprecedented rate; this has caused trillions of dollars of financial derivatives tied to the housing market to crash, sending shockwaves throughout the financial system and the broader economy, causing a recession.” As a narrative, media frames usually include standard literary devices like heroes, villains, victims, conflicts, challenges, and endings. The frame referenced above, for instance, would usually include villains (either irresponsible home buyers or greedy Wall Street banks), victims (Main Street, investors, the taxpayer), heroes (the president, activists, the Fed), conflicts (should banks or homeowners be bailed out?), challenges (how to prevent a destructive contagion from spreading throughout the global economy?), and, at the right time, endings (economic recovery, house prices have begun to recover).

Frames have been defined as “what unifies information into a package that can influence audiences.”<sup>419</sup> Alternately, frames can be seen as “an invitation or an incentive to read a news story in a particular way” – and “[b]ecause these frames often are unnoticed and implicit, their impact is by stealth.”<sup>420</sup> The influence of a frame can inhere in either the *information* it presents, or the way in which that information is *framed* – or both. Therefore,

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<sup>419</sup> David Tewksbury and Dietram A. Scheufele, “News Framing Theory and Research,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 17-33 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 19.

<sup>420</sup> Van Gorp, “The Constructionist Approach,” 63.

framing effects can occur either by the presentation of new information, the way that new information is packaged into a narrative, or most commonly through a combination of both. For instance, a news story on a war can be framed positively or negatively, even if it transmits the same basic facts; however, including different pieces of information can add to the negative (number of innocent civilians killed) or positive (interviews with supporters of the war) slant of the frame. Framing effects have been found for both “pure” frames and frames presenting different, supporting sets of information.<sup>421</sup>

For example, one experiment illustrates how the subtlest difference in information can produce framing effects in the absence of any differences in narrative.<sup>422</sup> Participants read a *New York Times* article describing partial-birth abortion. In one version, only the word “fetus” appeared; in the other version, the word “baby” was used exclusively instead. The results showed that those who had read the story that used only the word “fetus” were less supportive of a ban on partial-birth abortions than those who had read the exact same story, except with the word “baby” replacing “fetus.” Untangling “pure” framing effects from information effects is an ongoing research challenge.<sup>423</sup>

Framing is most powerful when the news story deals with unfamiliar issues or events, or when it creates linkages between familiar issues and existing beliefs, attitudes, and values.<sup>424</sup> Framing can also work by inspiring emotional reactions, and frames that

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<sup>421</sup> Emily K. Vraga et al., “Precision vs. Realism on the Framing Continuum: Understanding the Underpinnings of Message Effects,” *Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>422</sup> Adam F. Simon and Jennifer Jerit, “Toward a Theory Relating Political Discourse, Media, and Public Opinion,” *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>423</sup> Dietram A. Scheufele and Shanto Iyengar, “The State of Framing Research: A Call for New Directions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication Theories*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 1-26 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Tewksbury and Scheufele, “News Framing,” 28-29.

<sup>424</sup> Dhavan V. Shah et al., “‘To Thine Own Self Be True’ Values, Framing, and Voter Decision-Making Strategies,” *Communication Research* 23, no. 5 (1996); Tewksbury and Scheufele, “News Framing,” 25.

effectively use both cognitive and affective appeals may prove most effective.<sup>425</sup>

Particularly influential frames tap into deep-seated cultural narratives, convincing viewers or readers to interpret an event or issue according to a widely-held belief, like “government is inefficient and bungling,” or “my country always seeks to do good around the world.”<sup>426</sup> This aspect of framing demonstrates its cultural specificity. The power of framing relies on packaging information into a narrative familiar to the audience, drawing upon their shared social norms.<sup>427</sup> As such, frames are especially powerful when they are designed and sponsored by one’s favored political party, hence tapping into one’s political beliefs and initiating the process of motivated reasoning.<sup>428</sup>

An illustration of framing effects in a real-world political context is provided by the issue of climate change. In 1992, 92% of Democrats and 86% of Republicans supported stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment.<sup>429</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, right-leaning think tanks began a public opinion campaign to promote “environmental skepticism,”<sup>430</sup> bolstered by corporate funding.<sup>431</sup> This campaign was remarkably successful – but only for conservatives. In 1974, conservatives expressed greater trust in science than liberals and moderates; but by 2010, conservatives – particularly *educated*

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<sup>425</sup> Kimberly Gross, "Framing Persuasive Appeals: Episodic and Thematic Framing, Emotional Response, and Policy Opinion," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>426</sup> George Lakoff, "Changing Brains: Lessons from The Living Wage Campaign," in *Manipulating Democracy: Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media*, ed. Wayne Le Cheminant and John M. Parrish, 93-112 (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>427</sup> Timothy K.F. Fung and Dietram A. Scheufele, "Social Norms, Spirals of Silence and Framing Theory: An Argument for Considering Cross-Cultural Differences in Media Effects Research," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 131-144 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>428</sup> Rune Slothuus and Claes H. De Vreese, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 03 (2010).

<sup>429</sup> Pew Research Center, "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2007" (March, 22, 2007): 62.

<sup>430</sup> Peter J. Jacques et al., "The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Scepticism," *Environmental Politics* 17, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>431</sup> Justin Farrell, "Corporate Funding and Ideological Polarization about Climate Change," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 1 (2016).

conservatives – expressed considerably lower trust in science than both liberals and moderates.<sup>432</sup> In fact, the better the understanding of climate change conservatives claim to have, the *less* concerned they are about it.<sup>433</sup> A study of shifts in public opinion on climate change from 2003 to 2010 found that the biggest influences were media coverage and elite cues (in the media), not extreme weather or scientific advances in understanding the issue.<sup>434</sup> This massive, polarizing shift in public opinion seems to have occurred primarily through media influence, whether by transmitting elite cues, explaining scientific studies, or focusing attention elsewhere. Consonant with framing research, the media stories promoting “environmental skepticism” were influential only with conservatives, who resonated with the frames used to promote skepticism.<sup>435</sup>

Framing makes a direct impact on democratic functioning, not only through the way that issues are framed – but also by the way other issues are *not* framed. As Donald Kinder has argued:

Many perceptive analysts of politics have questioned whether citizens really know what they want and need; whether opinions on matters of public policy are actually, in one powerful formulation, “nonattitudes”. Nonattitudes are usually taken as a sign of the average citizens’ indifference to politics, but ... when elites provide useful frames, citizens may be more likely to see a connection between what they care about and what politics offers, and so may be more likely to develop real opinions....

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<sup>432</sup> Gordon Gauchat, "Politicization of Science in the Public Sphere: A Study of Public Trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>433</sup> Deborah Lynn Guber, "A Cooling Climate for Change? Party Polarization and the Politics of Global Warming," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>434</sup> Robert J. Brulle et al., "Shifting Public Opinion on Climate Change: An Empirical Assessment of Factors Influencing Concern over Climate Change in The US, 2002–2010," *Climatic Change* 114, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>435</sup> E.g., Slothuus and de Vreese, "Political Parties."

[W]hen provided helpful frames, citizens are more likely to express opinions, and such opinions are often more stable over time and better anchored in the political considerations that the frames appear to highlight.<sup>436</sup>

In other words, media framing has the potential to manipulate public opinion by commission (influencing the way events and issues are interpreted) *and* omission (failing to provide frames that make sense of unknown issues that would be of great interest to citizens). It is through omission that media framing sets the ideological boundaries for public discourse on political issues.<sup>437</sup> Particularly dangerous is when the media presents as equal frames 1) a serious distortion of an issue alongside 2) a careful consideration of the same issue; this creates an illusion of equality, cuing the audience to consider the egregious distortion as worthy of consideration.<sup>438</sup> Another way that media framing affects politics is by indirectly influencing the policymaking process: framing effects on citizens can shift public opinion on an issue, in turn pushing policymakers to respond by creating law addressing the public demand inspired by media framing.<sup>439</sup>

Framing effects have been found in a wide array of countries and issue areas. In the Netherlands, media frames (particularly negative frames) were found to have effects on opinions regarding Turkey's possible membership in the European Union.<sup>440</sup> In Sweden, negative media frames on mutual fund fees were found to reduce investments into funds

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<sup>436</sup> Donald R. Kinder, "Communication and Politics in the Age of Information," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears et al., 357-393 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 359-360, references removed.

<sup>437</sup> Robert M. Entman, "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>438</sup> Edelman, *The Politics*, 94.

<sup>439</sup> Edwards and Wood, "Who Influences Whom?"; Michelle Wolfe et al., "A Failure to Communicate: Agenda Setting in Media and Policy Studies," *Political Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>440</sup> Claes H. de Vreese et al., "(In) Direct Framing Effects: The Effects of News Media Framing on Public Support for Turkish Membership in The European Union," *Communication Research* 38, no. 2 (2011).

with high fees; however, dominant firms were able to successfully react to negative media coverage and limit its effects.<sup>441</sup> In the U.S., frames on welfare policy in both news and entertainment programming were found to have effects on viewers' opinions about welfare, effects greater than personal experiences or interpersonal conversations on the topic.<sup>442</sup> A study of opinions concerning a political rally by a racist hate group found that media frames had significant effects: those exposed to a frame highlighting the importance of civil liberties were more supportive of the rally, while those exposed to a frame highlighting the importance of public order were less supportive.<sup>443</sup> Approval of or disagreement with Supreme Court decisions is also powerfully affected by media frames.<sup>444</sup> Even political advertisements for candidates have been found to exert framing effects.<sup>445</sup>

Framing effects threaten the independence of citizens in a democratic society. If our opinions on political issues can be molded by media framing, in what sense are they still *our* opinions? Framing effects can, however, be muted. Offering multiple, competing frames of an issue reduces framing effects, and allows citizens to develop opinions on issues more in line with their values.<sup>446</sup> This can have direct effects on elections. For instance, during the 2002 Brazilian presidential election, legally-mandated free television time afforded to

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<sup>441</sup> Stefan Jonsson and Helena Buhr, "The Limits of Media Effects: Field Positions and Cultural Change in a Mutual Fund Market," *Organization Science* 22, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>442</sup> Mira Sotirovic, "Effects of Media Use on Audience Framing and Support for Welfare," *Mass Communication & Society* 3, no. 2-3 (2000).

<sup>443</sup> Thomas E. Nelson, et al., "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 03 (1997).

<sup>444</sup> Rosalee A. Clawson and Eric N. Waltenburg, "Support For A Supreme Court Affirmative Action Decision A Story in Black and White," *American Politics Research* 31, no. 3 (2003); Katerina Linos and Kimberly Twist, "Endorsement and Framing Effects in Experimental and Natural Settings: The Supreme Court, the Media and the American Public," *UC Berkeley Public Law Research Paper 2223732* (2013).

<sup>445</sup> Kyun Soo Kim et al., "Understanding the Effects of Message Frames in Political Advertisements: A Lesson From Text Comprehension," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, California (May 23, 2007).

<sup>446</sup> Beattie and Milojevich, "A Test"; Mauro P. Porto, "Frame Diversity and Citizen Competence: Towards a Critical Approach to News Quality," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007).

the candidates provided new frames of the issues that conflicted with the dominant frames in the media – swaying the election in favor of a candidate disliked by the economic elite and disfavored by the media.<sup>447</sup> Having conversations with people who have been exposed to conflicting frames also tends to mute framing effects – though conversations with people exposed to largely similar frames do not.<sup>448</sup> A study of news diffusion through blogs in South Korea found that the original frame provided by the media was replaced by new frames in a substantial proportion of blog posts.<sup>449</sup> Those who get their news primarily from the internet may be less susceptible to framing effects simply by being exposed to a greater number of frames.

Also, our preexisting knowledge about an issue – our schemas – moderates the effects of framing.<sup>450</sup> Unless we know nothing about a particular issue, our minds are not blank slates free to be shaped by media frames. Rather, media frames interact with our schemas; if we have well-developed, elaborate schemas on an issue, we are less likely to be influenced by a media frame that contradicts them. For instance, those with political beliefs emphasizing humanitarianism are more likely to be affected by media frames suggesting the need to help the unfortunate through welfare; while those with political beliefs emphasizing individualism are less likely to be affected by the latter frame, and more likely to be affected by frames emphasizing the need for a work requirement in welfare

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<sup>447</sup> Mauro P. Porto, "Framing Controversies: Television and the 2002 Presidential Election in Brazil," *Political Communication* 24, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>448</sup> James N. Druckman and Kjersten R. Nelson, "Framing and Deliberation: How Citizens' Conversations Limit Elite Influence," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>449</sup> Yung-Ho Im et al., "The Emerging Mediascape, Same Old Theories? A Case Study of Online News Diffusion in Korea," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>450</sup> Fuyuan Shen, "Effects of News Frames and Schemas on Individuals' Issue Interpretations and Attitudes," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2004).



programs.<sup>451</sup> Media frames have also been shown to interact with political opinions in affecting the likelihood of taking expressive political action, like discussing an issue with others or writing letters to newspapers.<sup>452</sup> Overall, framing effects can be muted or reduced by exposure to competing frames, discussions with others who frame an issue differently, the credibility of the source of the frame, individual predispositions like values and opinions, and the level of knowledge one already has about an issue.<sup>453</sup>

### **viii. Models of media influence: Agenda setting**

When one thinks of what should or could be on a democracy's political agenda, the possibilities are vast: taxes, public safety, environmental protection, immigration, constitutional amendments, welfare programs, unemployment, military issues, foreign affairs with one or several of the more than 200 countries in the world – the list is nearly endless. Yet at any given time, both politicians and the public are concerned with only a small subset. The media's power to set the political agenda is a substantial reason for this: by focusing airtime and newspaper columns on some issues at the expense of others, the media sets not only *its* agenda, but to a disconcerting extent, *ours* as well.<sup>454</sup> McCombs

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<sup>451</sup> Fuyuan Shen and Heidi Hatfield Edwards, "Economic Individualism, Humanitarianism, and Welfare Reform: A Value-Based Account of Framing Effects," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>452</sup> Michael P. Boyle et al., "Expressive Responses to News Stories about Extremist Groups: A Framing Experiment," *Journal of Communication* 56, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>453</sup> Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007).

<sup>454</sup> Justin Schlosberg explains:

[I]t is a particular form of control that lacks any identifiable agency. In contrast to propaganda, it need not involve any act of conscious manipulation, censorship or even active persuasion. ... Those who represent powerful corporate or state interests can legitimately claim to play no part in cajoling editors or enforcing their will on the editorial line. ... [T]he powerful do not shape the agenda: it merely bends in accordance with their will. ... This does not mean that such control is necessarily located in the hands of media owners themselves, but rather that the particular ways in which media institutions are structured and media systems organized can affect their vulnerability to definitional power – whether that power is wielded autonomously by individual

states that “the central assertion of agenda-setting theory is that those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded over time as important by the public.”<sup>455</sup> Other researchers add that “by ignoring some problems and attending to others, television news programs profoundly affect which problems viewers take seriously. This is so especially among the politically naive, who seem unable to challenge the pictures and narrations that appear on their television sets.”<sup>456</sup>

Agenda setting is a power the media has had for a long time.<sup>457</sup> Before the United States liberated itself from the British empire, the colonial press played a key role in generating a distinct national identity – an identity strong enough to inspire the American revolutionaries to risk their lives to overthrow British dominion. In the following century, progressive-era reformers recognized the power of the media to set the political agenda, and both they and their opponents used newspapers to sway public opinion and press government into action.

While agenda setting is not a one-to-one correspondence between issues highlighted in the media and those considered important by the public, the correspondence is very significant. (Even the way the media presents relationships among issues has been found to influence the way citizens organize those issues).<sup>458</sup> In a meta-analysis of 90 studies spanning several decades and countries, the overall average correlation was found

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media owners, outside vested interests, or by a power elite acting in concert. (Schlosberg, 2017, 14, 152)

<sup>455</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 5.

<sup>456</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., “Experimental Demonstrations of the ‘Not-So-Minimal’ Consequences of Television News Programs,” in *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius, 139-149 (New York: Psychology Press, 2004): 145-146.

<sup>457</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 32-34.

<sup>458</sup> Hong Tien Vu et al., “Exploring ‘the World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads’: A Network Agenda-Setting Study,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2014).

to be over 50 percent.<sup>459</sup> Over 400 studies have been conducted on agenda setting, including in North and South America, Europe, and Asia.<sup>460</sup> While agenda-setting research in Africa has been sparse, a study found strong agenda-setting effects in Kenya's 2007 presidential election.<sup>461</sup> Countries with more open governments and media systems tend to display stronger agenda setting effects.

Individual experiments demonstrate surprisingly strong agenda-setting effects. In Iyengar and Kinder's experiments, participants were shown news broadcasts that had been professionally edited to manipulate content.<sup>462</sup> They found that after watching edited newscasts highlighting the perils of the arms race, the percentage who viewed it as one of the country's three most important problems shot from 35 to 65 percent; for unemployment, the numbers went from 50 to 85 percent. As would be expected from research on schemas and their rigidity, viewers with relatively less education, Independents, and the politically uninvolved were most influenced by agenda setting: "[t]he more removed the viewer is from the world of public affairs, the stronger the agenda-setting power of television news."<sup>463</sup> An analysis of trends in network news coverage and public opinion corroborated these experimental findings.

Other investigators have found the same trend: public opinion tracks news media coverage.<sup>464</sup> In several countries, during different decades, examining a variety of issues

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<sup>459</sup> Wayne Wanta and Salma Ghanem, "Effects of Agenda Setting," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 37-51 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>460</sup> McCombs et al., *The News*.

<sup>461</sup> Uche Onyebadi, "Towards an Examination and Expansion of the Agenda Setting Theory: Did the Media Matter in Kenya's Presidential Election, 2007?" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, Columbia, 2008).

<sup>462</sup> Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*.

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>464</sup> David P. Fan and Albert R. Tims, "The Impact of the News Media on Public Opinion: American Presidential Election 1987-1988," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 1, no. 2 (1989); McCombs et al., *The News*.

and media sources, research has converged on the close link between what the media covers, and what the public considers to be important.<sup>465</sup> Increased exposure to the news media also powerfully predicts the degree of consensus on issue agendas between groups: men and women who read newspapers infrequently share a 55% correspondence, rising to 80% for those who read newspapers occasionally, all the way up to a 100% correspondence for daily readers. This pattern, first reported in the U.S., has been found to hold in Spain and Taiwan as well.<sup>466</sup>

But could these results be explained in the reverse causal direction? Could real-world developments directly cause public shifts in opinion on what should be on the political agenda – and this is merely reflected by the media, eager to attract attention to raise advertising revenues? This question has been investigated for several topics, in the U.S. and Germany; and the answer is no.<sup>467</sup> The public agenda strongly tracks the media agenda, largely disconnected from real-world trends. This occurred for the Vietnam war, campus protests, and urban riots; the German energy crisis of '73-'74; drug use in the U.S. during the '80s; crime in the '90s; environmental pollution during 1970-1990; and even shark attacks. While trends in the real-world spiked or dipped – increases or decreases in drug use, crime, pollution, etc. – the public agenda did not track them. Instead, the public agenda tracked the media agenda, which also did not closely follow real-world trends. “In effect, these were natural experiments in a real-world setting that yield especially

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<sup>465</sup> Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds, “How the News Shapes Our Civic Agenda,” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver, 1-16 (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009): 2-5.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>467</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 22-30; Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “The Effect of the Mass Media on Opinion Formation,” in *Mass Media, Social Control and Social Change: A Macrosocial Perspective*, ed. David Demers and Kasisomayajula Viswanath, 51-76 (Iowa City: Iowa State University Press, 1999): 67-68.

compelling causal evidence of the agenda-setting influence of the news media on the public.”<sup>468</sup>

One important limitation to the media’s agenda-setting power is in the realm of so-called “obtrusive” issues.<sup>469</sup> Obtrusive issues are those with which we have everyday experience: the economy and crime, for instance, obtrude into our lives in many ways.<sup>470</sup> Unobtrusive issues, like foreign affairs, are those with which we have little to no direct experience – our only contact with them is through the news media. In general, the media displays a greatly reduced agenda-setting power over obtrusive issues. In one study, not only did participants demonstrate agenda-setting effects only for unobtrusive issues, but they were more likely to say that the media was wrong about obtrusive issues, and express contrary opinions.<sup>471</sup> Interestingly, Graber found that over the course of a primary campaign, issues that had once been unobtrusive began to be treated as obtrusive issues through repeat exposure to them, thereby reducing the media’s agenda-setting power. One exception to this rule is any issue of great personal importance: for example, unemployment for the unemployed, discrimination for ethnic minorities, etc. For these obtrusive issues, appearing at the top of the media’s agenda serves as a validation of the national importance of what may have been thought to be merely personal – and agenda-setting effects are strong.<sup>472</sup> The media’s agenda-setting power may also be linked to the ability of the items on the news agenda to provoke negative emotional reactions:

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<sup>468</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 29.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>470</sup> However, not all economic issues are obtrusive; government budget deficits, for instance, are an issue which we do not usually experience in our day-to-day lives. A study of media coverage of the U.S. budget deficit found significant agenda-setting and framing effects, with amount of coverage and the type of framing powerfully influencing how important the public considered the issue (Jasperson et al., 1998).

<sup>471</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 106-107.

<sup>472</sup> Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 53.

prominent news stories that worry us or communicate a pressing need for solutions are more likely to make the move from the news agenda to ours.<sup>473</sup>

The reduced power of the media to set the public agenda for obtrusive issues may come as a welcome relief to those worried about the perversion of democracy. (Also, the internet has blunted the mass media's agenda-setting power somewhat.)<sup>474</sup> At the same time, it puts into stark relief the power the media has to set the foreign affairs agenda.<sup>475</sup> Memories of the media's role in securing public approval for the war on Iraq are still fresh enough to add a visceral bite to concerns in this domain.

Another welcome exception to the media's agenda-setting power concerns trust. For instance, a study of the 1994 Taipei mayoral election revealed no agenda-setting effects for television news.<sup>476</sup> All three television stations in Taipei were controlled by the government, making them untrustworthy in the public eye. However, an agenda-setting effect was found for the two dominant – and independent – newspapers in Taipei. Reassuringly, a media source's lack of trustworthiness does not mute only its agenda-setting power, but its ability to influence by framing and priming as well.<sup>477</sup> This relationship between trust and media effects is not ironclad, however. For instance, in Chile

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<sup>473</sup> Joanne M. Miller, "Examining the Mediators of Agenda Setting: A New Experimental Paradigm Reveals the Role of Emotions," *Political Psychology* 28, no. 6 (2007).

<sup>474</sup> Renita Coleman and Maxwell McCombs, "The Young and Agenda-Less? Exploring Age-Related Differences in Agenda Setting on the Youngest Generation, Baby Boomers, and the Civic Generation," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2007); Sharon Meraz, "Is There an Elite Hold? Traditional Media to Social Media Agenda Setting Influence in Blog Networks," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>475</sup> McCombs et al., *The News*, 81; Stuart N. Soroka, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 8, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>476</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 37.

<sup>477</sup> James N. Druckman, "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 4 (2001); Kinder, "Communication," 377; Joanne M. Miller and Jon A. Krosnick, "News Media Impact on the Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations: Politically Knowledgeable Citizens Are Guided by a Trusted Source," *American Journal of Political Science* (2000). This may help explain the success of Donald Trump's 2016 Republican nomination campaign in the face of hostile press coverage: trust in the U.S. media is at historic lows (Riffkin, 2015).

under the dictatorial regime of Pinochet, the government-controlled, rightwing press – hardly a trustworthy source – was found to exert influence on political opinions, even among leftists.<sup>478</sup> When citizens have few alternative sources of information, even untrustworthy media outlets can exert significant influence.

#### **ix. From what to think about, to *what to think***

*“The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about – an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priest, parties and mandarins.”*

- Theodore H. White, *The Making of the American President* 1972

The priming, framing, and agenda-setting models of media influence clearly establish an uncomfortable level of control over political opinion. On an optimistic reading, these three media effects can still be thought of as power over what we think *about*, rather than what we *think*. Yet there is significant evidence that the media exerts substantial power over what the population thinks, not just what we think about. As Robert Entman pointed out:

Although the distinction between “what to think” and “what to think about” is not entirely clear, the former seems to mean what people decide, favor, or accept,

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<sup>478</sup> Pablo Halpern, "Media Dependency and Political Perceptions in an Authoritarian Political System," *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 4 (1994). The rightwing media also played an influential role in fomenting the coup that inaugurated nearly two decades of dictatorship in Chile (Armoudian, 2011, 169-198).

whereas the latter refers to the considerations they “think about” in coming to such conclusions. The distinction misleads because, short of physical coercion, all influence over “what people think” derives from telling them “what to think about.” If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think.<sup>479</sup>

Studies of different media environments first picked up differences in political knowledge between those who did and did not have access to television in the ‘50s; differences in knowledge of state politics between those with and without access to newspapers from the state’s capital; and what happens to levels of political knowledge when a local newspaper is unavailable due to a strike.<sup>480</sup> Markus Prior’s study of the introduction of cable television provides another powerful demonstration of media influence. During the pre-cable broadcast era, television viewers had no choice but to watch the nightly news every evening. Both those who would have chosen anyway to watch the news, and those who would have rather watched entertainment programming, had no other option in the evening but the nightly news. With the introduction of cable, many of these viewers who preferred entertainment programming stopped watching the news. As cable access spread throughout the country, a clear pattern emerged: levels of political knowledge dropped in those areas newly served by cable, as “switchers” – those who would rather watch entertainment programming instead of news – stopped watching the news. This result demonstrates an important point: the switchers did not find an alternate source of political information (like talking to friends and acquaintances). Television news

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<sup>479</sup> Entman, “How the Media,” 165.

<sup>480</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 29.



was their lifeline to the realm of politics, and they chose to cut it. Furthermore, in the cable era, one's preference for news or entertainment programming became a better predictor of political knowledge than level of education.<sup>481</sup>

John Zaller's study of U.S. public opinion provided considerable support for the view that public opinion surveys reveal only immediately accessible "considerations" – and these considerations are determined by the flow of information from the news media.<sup>482</sup> While the minority of the country that is knowledgeable about politics seems more resistant to media influence, the majority of the population is largely uncritical about the ideas they are exposed to, and then internalize, from the media. While this uncritical majority is less likely to receive political messages from the media due to simple inattention, the messages they do receive are accepted as true at a much higher rate than their politically-knowledgeable counterparts. This effect is particularly strong in U.S. elections for the House of Representatives, where even the relatively politically-knowledgeable often lack much information about these contests. Television coverage of such races typically favor incumbents (via both political advertising and coverage of the incumbent's actions in Congress), and as a result, exposure to television increases voters' familiarity with incumbents but does little for challengers.<sup>483</sup>

The media also has the power to overcome selective perception and individual bias, as demonstrated by studies from Spain: increased exposure to the media increases both negative appraisals of individuals' favored candidate, and positive appraisals of other

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 116, 136-137.

<sup>482</sup> Zaller, *The Nature*.

<sup>483</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 187-190. See also Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982): 214-215.

candidates.<sup>484</sup> The media also demonstrates the complementary power to increase political polarization. In the United States, political polarization in the media has led to an equal polarization among parts of the public and in Congress.<sup>485</sup>

A study of the impact of Fox News' introduction into various media markets in the U.S. between 1996 and 2000 estimated that mere exposure to this channel was effective in persuading between three and 28 percent of non-Republican viewers to switch their votes.<sup>486</sup> Media *interpretations* of presidential debates can affect public opinion concerning who won the debate more powerfully than the debate itself: for instance, a poll taken immediately after a debate between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter found that viewers judged Ford to be the winner by 44% to 31% – but after one day of media coverage interpreting the debate as a Carter victory, public opinion shifted 61% to 19% in Carter's favor.<sup>487</sup> In Britain, several prominent conservative newspapers unexpectedly switched their endorsements for the Labour Party in 1997, allowing for a natural experiment to measure the effect this had on readers: a 10-25% shift in readers' votes.<sup>488</sup> In Italy, heavy watchers of television have been found to be more likely to vote for Silvio Berlusconi: the man who owns a majority of the Italian media.<sup>489</sup> In Russia, the only government-independent TV channel shifted votes in the 1999 presidential election by considerable

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<sup>484</sup> McCombs, *Setting the Agenda*, 74-75.

<sup>485</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 247.

<sup>486</sup> Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>487</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 121-122.

<sup>488</sup> Jonathan McDonald Ladd and Gabriel S. Lenz, "Exploiting a Rare Communication Shift to Document the Persuasive Power of the News Media," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (2009). The greater effect of right-leaning newspapers endorsing left-leaning candidates and vice versa has been found in the United States as well (Chiang and Knight, 2011).

<sup>489</sup> Massimo Ragnedda and Glenn W. Muschert, "The Regime of Propaganda in a Neoliberal State: Berlusconi and the Italian Media," in *The Propaganda Society: Promotional Culture and Politics in Global Context*, ed. Gerald Sussman, 93-107 (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

margins – in those areas of the country where it was available – toward the opposition parties the channel supported.<sup>490</sup> Another study revealed that news anchors, reporters, special commentators, and guest experts exerted a striking effect on public opinion on 80 political issues over 15 years; single commentaries were associated with more than four points of opinion change.<sup>491</sup> Likewise, the tone of media coverage of politician and political candidates is strongly correlated with public support for them, over time and in several countries.<sup>492</sup>

The way that public opinion tracks news media coverage is particularly striking evidence for the power of the media. Using a coding system to identify individual pieces of information<sup>493</sup> in Associated Press dispatches and the opinions they supported, David Fan was able to design a model that accurately predicted shifts in public opinion for six issues over time.<sup>494</sup> This is a massive media effect: “when all AP messages were considered for these [six issues] studied, the accumulated power of mass media messages was found to determine opinion so strongly that accurate opinion time trends could be calculated from mass media [memes] alone.”<sup>495</sup>

The news media’s coverage of the economy has been found to influence our views of where the economy is headed; potentially creating self-fulfilling prophecies by boosting or

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<sup>490</sup> Ruben Enikolopov, et al., "Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia," *The American Economic Review* 101, no. 7 (2011).

<sup>491</sup> Benjamin I. Page et al., "What Moves Public Opinion?" *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 01 (1987).

<sup>492</sup> McCombs et al., *The News*, 114-115.

<sup>493</sup> Fan named these “infons,” but they are substantially similar to memes: units of information that differentially spread throughout a population.

<sup>494</sup> David. P. Fan, *Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media: Computer Content Analysis and Mathematical Modeling* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988).

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

depressing consumer sentiment.<sup>496</sup> Media coverage of firms before their initial public offering (IPO) is linked to demand for their shares, with greater volume and more positive tenor of coverage correlating with greater demand and higher share prices.<sup>497</sup> Another analysis of economic issues in the media found that only five stories per month on inflation, and eleven stories per month on unemployment, were required to boost public concern about these issues by one percentage point.<sup>498</sup> More troubling is the financial media's propensity to support *laissez faire* policies and oppose economic theories and views that advocate a greater role for government in the economy, stifling what should be an area of vibrant public debate.<sup>499</sup> Media campaigns waged by business organizations in the '40s and '70s in the United States were instrumental in pushing public opinion toward support of conservative, *laissez faire* economic policy<sup>500</sup> – therefore, it is hardly a stretch to infer that the news media's contemporary coverage of economic issues undergirds public opinion on economic policy.

Perhaps most worrisome is the media's demonstrated power to persuade us to support wars.<sup>501</sup> Wars – and their political and economic causes – are a topic the vast majority of us have to rely on the media to learn anything about. Hence, the media's

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<sup>496</sup> Joe Bob Hester and Rhonda Gibson, "The Economy and Second-Level Agenda Setting: A Time-Series Analysis of Economic News and Public Opinion about the Economy," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>497</sup> Timothy G. Pollock and Violina P. Rindova, "Media Legitimation Effects in the Market for Initial Public Offerings," *Academy of Management Journal* 46, no. 5 (2003).

<sup>498</sup> Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 28-32.

<sup>499</sup> Aeron Davis, "Promotion, Propaganda, and High Finance," in *The Propaganda Society: Promotional Culture and Politics in Global Context*, ed. Gerald Sussman, 251-266 (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

<sup>500</sup> Carey, *Taking the Risk*.

<sup>501</sup> Matthew A. Baum, *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003): 212-223. However, those of low socioeconomic status who got political information primarily from "soft news" were found (during the 1990s at least) more likely to *disapprove* of military interventionism: a "presumably unintended by-product of [soft news] packaging is that the same episodic framing of human drama in a violent context that makes a story compelling may also produce a repellent effect" when applied to real-world wars (Baum, 2003, 258).

influence (and the influence of political elites, whom journalists rely on) on war-related opinions is unambiguous.<sup>502</sup> For instance, one study found that those who watched more television news were more supportive of a military rather than a diplomatic solution to the Gulf Crisis in the early '90s.<sup>503</sup> A similar pattern was found in operation during the second war on Iraq, with false perceptions about Iraq linked to support for the war and exposure to television news (especially Fox News; the opposite was found for PBS/NPR).<sup>504</sup> Even earlier, in the '70s and '80s, public opinion on military spending followed the news media's lead – first supporting greater spending, then cuts.<sup>505</sup> The war on Vietnam reveals some interesting dynamics among generally pro-war conservative “hawks” and anti-war liberal “doves”:

First of all, the least informed within each camp behave similarly. Owing to their habitual inattentiveness to politics, they are late to support the war and also late to respond to antiwar information. Moderately aware hawks and doves also behave fairly similarly: They fail to support the war in its initial stage because they have not been sufficiently propagandized; as the prowar message heats up, they become more supportive of the war, but then just as quickly begin to abandon the war when the antiwar message becomes loud enough to reach them. The most politically aware ideologues, meanwhile, behave very differently. Highly aware doves begin turning against the war as early as 1966; highly aware hawks, by contrast, largely

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<sup>502</sup> Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007); Friedman, "Beyond Cues."

<sup>503</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing," *Communication Research* 20, no. 3 (1993).

<sup>504</sup> Steven Kull et al., "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>505</sup> Zaller, *The Nature*, 15.

hold their ground, so that they are almost as likely to support the war in 1970 as they were at the start of the conflict. The explanation, of course, is that hawks were sustained by a steady flow of ideologically congenial prowar messages and were, at the same time, highly resistant to the ideologically inconsistent antiwar message.<sup>506</sup> As discussed earlier, heavy exposure to U.S. news media has been experimentally tied to a form of aggressive, materialistic nationalism.<sup>507</sup> And a series of studies of opinions on terrorism found that those who watch a great deal of television were more likely to be unable to explain the causes of terrorism, or to offer simplistic explanations like “terrorists are insane.”<sup>508</sup>

A different sort of media phenomenon is called the third-person effect: the belief that the media influences others more strongly than it influences us. The third-person effect has been linked to other media effects, like agenda-setting and cultivation: we are more likely to believe the media affects the political agenda or influences values for others than for ourselves.<sup>509</sup> While little more than an oddity in its own right, the third-person effect can have downstream consequences. For instance, it can affect our views of *other's* opinions – making them seem more like what we see in the media – thereby creating “media-altered” social pressure to conform to beliefs and ideas propounded by the media, or buy products viewed as desirable by others who have been influenced by media

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>507</sup> Ferguson et al., “On the Automaticity.”

<sup>508</sup> Milburn, *Persuasion*, 148.

<sup>509</sup> Leo W. Jeffres et al., “Integrating Theoretical Traditions in Media Effects: Using Third-Person Effects to Link Agenda-Setting and Cultivation,” *Mass Communication and Society* 11, no. 4 (2008).

messages and advertisements.<sup>510</sup> This is an effect that can compound other media effects, by adding the pressure of social conformity to media messages.<sup>511</sup>

Political participation is another area in which the media has clear and strong effects. A meta-analysis of 18 studies of the relationship between newspaper or television exposure and political involvement found a strong correlation for reading newspapers, but a weak and conflicting relationship for watching television news.<sup>512</sup> The link between receiving political information from the media and participating in politics holds at the local level as well. Exposure to local newspapers, in interaction with the level of community integration, is linked to greater levels of civic engagement.<sup>513</sup> Another study linked exposure to both newspapers and television news to participation in local politics.<sup>514</sup> Exposure to *partisan* news has particularly noticeable effects on political participation. During electoral campaigns, exposure to partisan news favoring the *opposing* party tends to sway partisans to defect, and vote for the opposing candidate.<sup>515</sup> Exposure to likeminded partisan news significantly increases campaign activity over time and encourages an earlier decision time; while exposure to partisan news from the opposition have exactly the

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<sup>510</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 263.

<sup>511</sup> Albert C. Gunther, "The Intersection of Third-Person Effect and Spiral of Silence," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 145-152 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>512</sup> Barry A. Hollander, "Media Use and Political Involvement," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, edited by Raymond W. Preiss et al., 377-390 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007). However, studies published after 1985 revealed a stronger, negative relationship between watching television news and political involvement.

<sup>513</sup> Hye-Jin Paek et al., "Local News, Social Integration, and Community Participation: Hierarchical Linear Modeling of Contextual and Cross-Level Effects," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>514</sup> Jack M. McLeod et al., "Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999).

<sup>515</sup> Susanna Dilliplane, "Activation, Conversion, or Reinforcement? The Impact of Partisan News Exposure on Vote Choice," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 1 (2014).

opposite effects, depressing campaign activity and delaying voting decisions.<sup>516</sup> This research suggests that in future elections, the role of moderate voters with low levels of political knowledge will decrease as the role of partisan, knowledgeable voters increases. This trend is in evidence.<sup>517</sup>

The media exerts influence on voting turnout as well. A field experiment in which some participants were given a brief, free subscription to one of two local newspapers found that those who received a subscription were more likely to vote than a control group.<sup>518</sup> A study of the nationwide expansion of *The New York Times* in the late '90s found that in markets with small, local papers losing subscribers to the *Times*, voting declined in local elections, but not in presidential elections.<sup>519</sup> This national newspaper did not actively promote apathy toward local elections; it simply did not disseminate information about them, leaving voters with little knowledge, hence little reason to vote. Another study found that living farther away from a state capital decreased knowledge of state politics, as the result of local papers providing less coverage.<sup>520</sup> Overall, a meta-analysis of studies on the relationship between news media exposure and voting found a strong relationship between newspaper reading and voting, but a more complex, less generalizable relationship for television news.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> Susanna Dilliplane, "All the News You Want to Hear: The Impact of Partisan News Exposure on Political Participation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2011): 304.

<sup>517</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*; Markus Prior, "Media and Political Polarization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013); Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Do the Facts Speak for Themselves? Partisan Disagreement as a Challenge to Democratic Competence," *Critical Review* 20, no. 1-2 (2008).

<sup>518</sup> Alan S. Gerber et al., "Does the Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* (2009).

<sup>519</sup> Lisa George and Joel Waldfogel, "Does the New York Times Spread Ignorance and Apathy?" (working paper, Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 2002).

<sup>520</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini et al., "Effects of the News Media Environment on Citizen Knowledge of State Politics and Government," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (1994).

<sup>521</sup> Dorina Miron and Jennings Bryant, "Mass Media and Voter Turnout," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 391-413 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).



During the '50s and '60s, when television was diffusing through U.S. society, less educated citizens increased their levels of political knowledge and began voting in higher numbers.<sup>522</sup> In general, exposure to political information through the media increases the likelihood of voting.<sup>523</sup> This occurs for a number of reasons: information allows us to develop interest in the realm of politics in the first place, and to know who is running, the issues at stake, and differences between candidates we may find important.

Clearly, in the aggregate, media effects are far from minimal. This provides partial support for Robert Dahl's pessimistic conjecture that media-centered democracy is substantially equivalent to the model of totalitarian rule. Clearly, if an elite were capable of "plugging in" to the system its own political preferences, this would be the case (discussed in the following chapter). But could self-interest save us from this conclusion? In other words, could public opinion be the combined aggregate of each of our self-interested political desires, with media influence skewing these only slightly? Not likely. Voters make their decisions not on the basis of their personal pocketbook, but on the basis of how they perceive the national, collective economic condition.<sup>524</sup> (Only the most politically-sophisticated voters evince pocketbook voting.)<sup>525</sup> Self-interest has been revealed to be a surprisingly weak influence on political opinions on a wide range of issues: affirmative action, unemployment insurance, universal health care, government funding for schools, military drafts, equal rights for women in the workforce, and economic policy. "One must

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<sup>522</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 80-87.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>524</sup> Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (University of Chicago Press, 1994): 31-32; David O. Sears and Carolyn L. Funk, "Self-Interest in Americans' Political Opinions," in *Beyond Self-Interest*, ed. Jane J. Mansbridge, 147-170 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>525</sup> Brad T. Gomez and J. Matthew Wilson, "Political Sophistication and Economic Voting in the American Electorate: A Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution," *American Journal of Political Science* (2001).

conclude, looking at the litany of negative findings, that citizens do not seem especially sensitive to their own material interests when making political decisions. Unless the material outcomes from a public policy or issue are very clear, very large, and very imminent ... self-interest does not determine opinion or action.”<sup>526</sup> With self-interest off the table as a primary determinant of public opinion, the media’s role looms ever larger.

#### **x. The silent death rattle of media-centered democracies**

Just as the terrifying effectiveness of fascist propaganda during World War II inspired a surge in media research in the United States, in a very different way it inspired a theory about how the media, in combination with social pressure, could silence dissent. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann began her career as a journalist for the Nazi government in Germany, giving her ample reason years later to be frustrated by the “minimal effects” paradigm of media research.<sup>527</sup> Surely, the Nazi propaganda machine produced far more than minimal effects. After decades of experience in researching public opinion in post-war Germany, Noelle-Neumann published her *Theory of Public Opinion*, which introduced the “spiral of silence.”

Spiral of silence theory proposes an explanation of how people first observe, and then react to, what other people think about political and social topics.<sup>528</sup> Since people are afraid of social rejection and isolation, we are continually scanning our social environment

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<sup>526</sup> Taber, “Information Processing,” 448.

<sup>527</sup> Wolfgang Donsbach et al., “The Legacy of Spiral of Silence Theory: An Introduction,” in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 1-18 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>528</sup> Jörg Matthes and Andrew F. Hayes, “Methodological Conundrums in Spiral of Silence Research,” in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 54-64 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

to understand which opinions are common or accepted. The media is a prime resource for this task, along with day-to-day conversations. When we perceive that our opinions are in the minority, or losing public support, we become less likely to express our views to others – making these views seem even less popular to those looking to us (and the media) to gauge their social acceptability. Over time, this positive feedback loop – the spiral of silence – results in minority views becoming less and less prevalent, until only a small group of hardcore adherents remain. And since opinion leaders get their political information almost exclusively from the media, the predominant arbiter of the climate of social opinion is, again, the media.<sup>529</sup>

These predictions about group behavior dovetail with Doris Graber's observations of her research participants,<sup>530</sup> who "obviously strove to adjust their expressed views, and possibly their actual views, to what they perceived to be the shared norms... [silent members] indicated that they had abstained from participation because they perceived their own views to be substantially out of line with those already articulated by the group."<sup>531</sup> They also evinced interest in public opinion polls as a way of assessing the merits of political policies and institutions, equating "failure to win substantial public endorsement with weakness and lack of merit."<sup>532</sup>

As a theory proposing a broad social phenomenon caused by interlinked processes, and affected by several differing personality variables, the spiral of silence has been

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<sup>529</sup> Hans Mathias Kepplinger, "Three Contexts of the Spiral of Silence Theory," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 44-56 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>530</sup> Noelle-Neumann's preferred methodology in investigating political opinions shares similarities with Graber's: instead of relying solely on forced-choice answers to survey questions, Noelle-Neumann used interviews to probe individuals' opinions more accurately (Kepplinger, 2014).

<sup>531</sup> Graber, *Processing the News*, 35.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

difficult to definitely prove through empirical research.<sup>533</sup> Nevertheless, empirical research has upheld the core tenet of the theory, showing a correlation between the perceived climate of opinion and one's willingness to express a contrary opinion. In a meta-analysis of 17 studies, a small but statistically significant correlation between the two was found.<sup>534</sup> (A later meta-analysis adding 12 additional studies confirmed the earlier result.)<sup>535</sup> While personality variables like shyness can accentuate this effect, and outspokenness can mute it, the spiral of silence is a force or tendency in Bhaskar's scientific realist sense: it may exist without being exercised, be exercised without being realized, be realized without being detected, or be transformed by opposing tendencies.<sup>536</sup> In other words, the spiral of silence is an ever-present possibility in media-centered societies, appearing under certain cultural conditions and types of media system. Cultures valuing interdependence over individuality – hence conformity over independence – are more prone to spiral of silence effects.<sup>537</sup> The appearance of internet-based media may tend to mute the spiral of silence, by reducing the fear of social isolation (one can always find like-minded others on the internet), and providing an opportunity to bias perceptions of the climate of opinion in society (one can choose only ideologically-similar media sources on the internet).<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Matthes and Hayes, "Methodological Conundrums."

<sup>534</sup> James Shanahan et al., "The Spiral of Silence: A Meta-Analysis and Its Impact," In *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 415-427 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>535</sup> Carroll J. Glynn and Michael E. Hoge. "Speaking in Spirals: An Updated Meta-Analysis of the Spiral of Silence," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 65-72 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>536</sup> Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory*, 18.

<sup>537</sup> Fung and Scheufele, "Social Norms"; Sonny Rosenthal and Benjamin Hill Detenber, "Cultural Orientation and the Spiral of Silence," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 187-200 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>538</sup> Patricia Moy and Muzammil M. Hussain, "Media and Public Opinion in a Fragmented Society," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 92-100 (New York: Routledge, 2014); Patrick Rössler and Anne Schulz, "Public Opinion Expression in Online Environments," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 101-118 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

(Already, there is evidence that the internet has helped the minority of atheists and agnostics in the U.S. to grow.)<sup>539</sup> Nor are opinions held by a majority predicted to be *invincibly* dominant by spiral of silence theory: dedicated and enthusiastic groups in the minority of public opinion can, by expressing their views with a force and exposure out of proportion with their size, initiate a spiral of increasing acceptance.<sup>540</sup> The successes of the civil rights and LGBT movements are positive examples of this counter-spiral. On the other hand, the rise of the Nazis in Germany from fringe group to dominant force is a negative example.

#### **xi. Ideological self-segregation**

Since the founding of the United States, a strongly partisan, small-scale press has facilitated a lively political culture. However, the “professionalization” of journalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reduced the partisanship of most of the press, as the norm of (attempted) objectivity slowly replaced ideologically-driven journalism. The rise of “professional” journalism seemingly produced a more centrist, ideologically-uniform citizenry; and even inspired calls for a return to the more partisan, competitive model of journalism as ideological combat.<sup>541</sup> Today, it seems as though the development of “professional” journalism may have been merely a brief interlude in U.S. history, as cable and the internet have reintroduced a proliferation of partisan media outlets alongside their more “objective,” mainstream counterparts.

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<sup>539</sup> Allen B. Downey, “Religious Affiliation, Education and Internet Use,” *arXiv preprint arXiv:1403.5534* (2014).

<sup>540</sup> Jacob Shamir, “Pluralistic Ignorance and the Spiral of Silence Meet: Mutual Lessons,” in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 153-160 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>541</sup> Diana C. Mutz and Lori Young, “Communication and Public Opinion: Plus Ça Change?” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75, no. 5 (2011): 1023.

This has alerted many to the potential danger of ideological self-segregation: citizens choosing media sources that only reinforce and never challenge their political beliefs. Ideological self-segregation results in the absorption of biased, inaccurate information that is held uncontested in an environment walled off from any possible challenge. Whether a partisan or “professional” press is preferable is a difficult question to submit to scientific scrutiny. However, a study using mathematical models to compare the effects of an ideological monopoly (“objective” journalism) versus an ideological duopoly (partisan news favoring one of two political parties) found that citizens may be *less* informed when faced with two-sided partisan news.<sup>542</sup> As Jacques Ellul described the danger of ideological self-segregation:

*[T]he more propaganda there is, the more partitioning there is. For propaganda suppresses conversation; the man opposite is no longer an interlocutor but an enemy. And to the extent that he rejects that role, the other becomes an unknown whose words can no longer be understood. Thus, we see before our eyes how a world of closed minds establishes itself, a world in which everybody talks to himself, everybody constantly reviews his own certainty about himself and the wrongs done him by the Others – a world in which nobody listens to anybody else, everybody talks, and nobody listens. And the more one talks, the more one isolates oneself, because the more one accuses others and justifies oneself.*<sup>543</sup>

There is evidence that people naturally tend toward ideological self-segregation by seeking out views and information already consonant with their beliefs.<sup>544</sup> This makes sense, as

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<sup>542</sup> Daniel F. Stone, "Ideological Media Bias," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 78, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>543</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 213-214.

<sup>544</sup> Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (2011); Sunstein, "The Law."

exposure to ideologically-dissonant news has been linked to a spike in levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.<sup>545</sup> We are literally stressed out, to some extent, by merely exposing ourselves to news we do not like.<sup>546</sup> When we are exposed to news that conflicts with our ideology, we tend to react by increasing our level of skepticism and actively arguing against it.<sup>547</sup> This tendency is greater for those with higher levels of political knowledge, and results in greater polarization of opinions as motivated reasoning pushes all sides of a political debate to accept consonant and reject inconsonant information.<sup>548</sup>

Furthermore, even if we do not *actively* seek out ideologically-congenial sources of information, we may be *passively* exposed to it – and excluded from information that would challenge our beliefs. Studies of social networks have revealed that they tend toward homophily and homogeneity; in other words, we naturally associate with those who are similar to ourselves. As we continue to get more of our news from social networking sites – the news that our (mostly like-minded) friends share – our risk of *passive* ideological self-segregation increases.<sup>549</sup> We need less and less to actively *choose* what we like from a diversity of perspectives, and instead are served ideologically-consonant material on a platter. A study of social networks and their effects on the quality of political thinking found that the more ideologically-segregated our social network is, the lower the quality

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<sup>545</sup> Hart Blanton et al., "Partisan Identification as a Predictor of Cortisol Response to Election News," *Political Communication* 29, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>546</sup> There is also some experimental evidence that selecting news with negative information about groups we are *not* members of can actually increase our self-esteem (Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall, 2010).

<sup>547</sup> Charles S. Taber, "Political Cognition and Public Opinion," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, ed. Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs, 368-383 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 375; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>548</sup> Charles S. Taber et al., "The Motivated Processing of Political Arguments," *Political Behavior* 31, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>549</sup> Mutz & Young, "Communication," 1038.

and complexity of our political thinking.<sup>550</sup> An ideologically-uniform social network creates a “social bubble” where we are rarely exposed to challenging information, causing our reasoning skills to atrophy.

There is evidence of *active* selective exposure as well. A meta-analysis of 22 studies of selective exposure supported the conclusion that we tend to avoid cognitive dissonance by selecting ideologically-congenial media sources, although the overall effect of selective exposure is relatively small.<sup>551</sup> An experiment presenting participants with the option of reading news stories from either conservative or liberal sources found that conservatives overwhelmingly chose a conservative source, while liberals chose a liberal source – even for “soft” news about crime or travel.<sup>552</sup> The most partisan participants in the experiment were most likely to make their selections in line with their political ideology. A study of nationwide survey results found that 64% of conservatives select at least one conservative media source, compared to only 26% of liberals; while 76% of liberals select at least one liberal media source, compared to 43% of conservatives.<sup>553</sup> The evidence on selective exposure may help explain why political polarization is increasing among the most politically-engaged in the U.S.<sup>554</sup>

However, most people do not simply refuse to hear the other side. In the United States, most self-identified Republicans and Democrats have largely indistinguishable news

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<sup>550</sup> Elif Erisen and Cengiz Erisen, "The Effect of Social Networks on the Quality of Political Thinking," *Political Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>551</sup> Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen, "The Selective Exposure Hypothesis and Media Choice Processes," in *Mass Media Effects Research: Advances through Meta-Analysis*, ed. Raymond W. Preiss et al., 103-118 (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007).

<sup>552</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use," *Journal of Communication* 59, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>553</sup> Natalie Jomini Stroud, "Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>554</sup> Prior, "Media and Political."



diets, watching mostly non-partisan local TV news while ignoring the partisan media altogether. Only a small subset of the most politically-engaged partisans choose their information on the basis of their preferred ideology.<sup>555</sup> A study of newspaper readers in Germany found much the same result: readers selected which articles to read more on the basis of placement and news value, rather than ideological conformity.<sup>556</sup> Even on the internet, where the ease of achieving total ideological self-segregation is higher than in any other medium, there is no evidence of extreme ideological segregation.<sup>557</sup> While people tend to select ideologically-congruent sources to a greater degree on the internet than with TV news, magazines, and local newspapers, there is less ideological segregation on the internet than with national newspapers, and far less than in families, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, workplaces, and even zip codes. An experimental study revealed that when we think we may have to participate in a conversation or debate about an issue, we are more likely to expose ourselves to a balance of ideological views on the internet.<sup>558</sup> While ideological self-segregation may, in the main, be confined to a small subset of the most politically-engaged members of a population, it remains yet another source of potential bias and inefficiency in the marketplace of information. For one, the most-engaged members of the public likely exert greater influence on the political realm than their less-interested counterparts. Additionally, there is a danger that as more people switch to the internet as their primary source of news, ideological self-segregation will

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<sup>555</sup> Michael J. LaCour, "A Balanced News Diet, Not Selective Exposure: Evidence from a Direct Measure of Media Exposure," APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper, (September 25, 2015). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2110621>.

<sup>556</sup> Wolfgang Donsbach, "Exposure to Political Content in Newspapers: The Impact of Cognitive Dissonance on Readers' Selectivity," *European Journal of Communication* 6, no. 2 (1991).

<sup>557</sup> Gentzkow and Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation."

<sup>558</sup> Nicholas A. Valentino et al., "Selective Exposure in the Internet Age: The Interaction between Anxiety and Information Utility," *Political Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2009).

become easier – facilitated by personalized (or manipulated)<sup>559</sup> search results and social media – and increase. There is yet the unsettling possibility that we are slowly seeing “how a world of closed minds establishes itself, a world in which everybody talks to himself, everybody constantly reviews his own certainty about himself and the wrongs done him by the Others.”<sup>560</sup>

### **xii. Mo’ media, mo’ problems – and less knowledge**

*“If not regulated, the current Monopoly could give way to a new Tower of Babel, in which a half-hundred voices scream in a cacophonous attempt to attract the largest audience... [Cable television could be] a debilitating and decaying force that could one day make us look back at the Sixties as the Golden Age.”*

- Fred Friendly in 1970, cited in *The Master Switch*

Alongside the danger of ideological segregation among the most politically-involved members of the population, there is the problem posed by the rest: namely, apathy and disinterest. Starting in the 1950s, television ownership in the United States went from a rarity to a fixture. By the middle of the decade, over 80% of households had a TV. Depending on one’s location, the channels available were limited to three major broadcast networks, and a smattering of local offerings. And on each of the networks, at the same time every evening, would be broadcast a nightly news program. Since there were few

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<sup>559</sup> Robert Epstein and Ronald E. Robertson, "The Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME) and Its Possible Impact on the Outcomes of Elections," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 33 (2015). If search engine results were manipulated, their effects on voting choices could be as high as 20% for undecided voters.

<sup>560</sup> Ellul, *Propaganda*, 215.

other options to watch, a majority of the population who relaxed in front of the television in the evenings would be exposed to the nightly newscast. Many of them may not have had much of an interest in politics – but if they wanted to watch television after a day of work, they would nonetheless be presented with a nonpartisan, middle-of-the-road presentation of the day’s news from one of the major networks.<sup>561</sup>

The effects of nightly news broadcasts on the public’s political knowledge were extensive, particularly for the least educated. The steady increase in number of television channels and the geographical area they covered allowed for precise estimates of television’s contribution to political interest and knowledge. The net difference between areas with no VHF station coverage and areas with at least three stations, for those in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of educational attainment, was a 12% increase in political knowledge.<sup>562</sup> The effects of television on political knowledge for those with higher levels of education were smaller, but still noticeable. Likewise, exposure to television increased voter turnout, again particularly for those with below-average levels of education. A recent study confirms that television news serves as an equalizing force, reducing the gap in political knowledge between those with low and high levels of education.<sup>563</sup>

What happened in the United States as television, and its nightly news broadcasts, spread throughout the country is that an audience that traditionally had not known much about politics came to learn something – and began to vote in higher numbers. These may not have been people who had much intrinsic interest in politics; but if they liked to watch

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<sup>561</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-82.

<sup>563</sup> Jennifer Jerit et al., "Citizens, Knowledge, and the Information Environment," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2006).

television in the evening, they had no choice but to be exposed to nightly news. Thereby, they learned about the political realm, and began to participate in politics by voting.

A significant proportion of these people would have rather skipped the news and watched pure entertainment – but they simply did not have the option. Beginning in the 1980s, cable television began to take off, offering additional channels featuring more entertainment options. At the same time, the number of people tuning into the nightly network newscasts began to plummet, dropping precipitously from the 1980s through the 2000s – people who had watched the news simply out of lack of options now changed the channel. As a result, those with less education lost the gains in political interest and knowledge they had made in the past through exposure to nightly newscasts. With less political interest and knowledge, voter turnout dropped in turn.

Today's proliferation of entertainment and news options on television and the internet has caused greater stratification in levels of political knowledge in the population. A small minority of the population can be described as “news junkies” who now have access to more information than ever in the past, and take advantage of it. Meanwhile, a much larger share of the population is choosing to largely avoid the news, whether on TV or in newspapers, and enjoy more entertainment.<sup>564</sup> The end result is a small percentage of the public that learns a lot about politics, and a majority whose political knowledge is meager. “Strongly partisan minorities continue to roil national politics, but the largest

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<sup>564</sup> Richard L. Fox and Amy Gangl. “‘News You Can’t Use’: Politics and Democracy in the New Media Environment,” in *Manipulating Democracy: Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media*, ed. Wayne Le Cheminant and John M. Parrish, 163-189 (New York: Routledge, 2011). However, there has been an increase in the numbers of people getting political information from the internet. While newspapers and television news have been shown to produce more accurate memories of news stories than internet sources, internet news may help people to better organize their structure of political knowledge in memory (Eveland, Seo, & Marton, 2002).

segment of the public seems to have selected itself out of the game.”<sup>565</sup> This stratification of political knowledge is unhealthy for a democracy: “[i]ncreasing inequality in news exposure, political knowledge, and turnout exacerbates concerns about the quality of public opinion and voting decisions.”<sup>566</sup> If only a small percentage of the public is really informed about political questions, in what sense is democracy rule by *the*, as opposed to *some*, people?<sup>567</sup>

Decades of studies and surveys of the U.S. public have revealed an exceptional lack of knowledge about even the most basic of political facts.<sup>568</sup> From not understanding the differences between competing political philosophies, to not knowing the basic functions of different governmental entities or the names of powerful politicians, political ignorance is rampant in the United States. Although opinion polls on a wide variety of political issues typically report only a small percentage of people who “don’t know,” on the rare occasions when pollsters attempt to ascertain how much their respondents *do* know, they regularly find it to be very little.<sup>569</sup> As James Stimson describes the reaction of early public opinion researchers to the astounding levels of political ignorance in the United States:

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<sup>565</sup> Bennett and Iyengar, “A New Era,” 722.

<sup>566</sup> Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, 160. One positive consequence of the new media environment is that it may reduce the influence of spiral-of-silence dynamics, since a multitude of news options makes it less likely that the climate of opinion will seem uniform (Moy & Hussain, 2014; Rosenthal & Detenber, 2014); likewise, the internet offers few of the social context cues that can either silence or encourage the expression of views (Rössler & Shulz, 2014).

<sup>567</sup> Writing in an earlier era, and with regard to totalitarian systems, Jacques Ellul described the danger of a passive, ignorant citizenry:

[T]he State has a free hand [when] the citizenry is totally uninterested in political matters....

[T]he State, in various ways ... neutralizes the masses, forces them into passivity, throws them back on their private life and personal happiness (actually according them some necessary satisfactions on this level), in order to leave a free hand to those who are in power, to the active, to the militant. This ... offers very great advantages for the State. (Ellul, 1973, 192)

<sup>568</sup> E.g., Scott L. Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 10-12; Cottam et al., *Introduction*, 134-135; Friedman, *No Exit*, 249-251; Taber, “Information Processing,” 455-456.

<sup>569</sup> David William Moore, *The Opinion Makers: An Insider Exposes the Truth Behind the Polls* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

Thus it seemed obvious that citizens were completely inept, totally unprepared to play their expected role in a democracy. It is hard to overstate the evidence of public ignorance, hard to express the analyst's initial despair at finding out what *isn't* known by people on the street. Everyone who has looked at survey data on public knowledge and preference has experienced it. The gap between what democracy seems to demand of voters and what voters supply is just immense.<sup>570</sup>

Given the real and opportunity costs of collecting information in a media system that does not provide it cheaply – for instance, delivered at the push of the power button on a TV remote – such ignorance should not surprise. “[A] focus on information costs leads to the expectation that only some voters—those who must gather the information in the course of their daily lives or who have a particularly direct stake in the issue—will develop a detailed understanding of any issues. Most voters will only learn enough to form a very generalized notion of the position of a particular candidate or party on some issues, and many voters will be ignorant about most issues.”<sup>571</sup>

As Scott Althaus artfully put it, “[i]f ignorance is bliss, then the pursuit of happiness seems alive and well in American society.”<sup>572</sup> Except, ignorance is not a *pursuit*, it is our default state; one which can only be left if information is provided “cheaply,” easily, accessibly. Tom Ferguson writes that

it is not necessary to assume or argue that the voting population is stupid or malevolent to explain why it often will not stir at even gross affronts to its own

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<sup>570</sup> James A. Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 14, emphasis added.

<sup>571</sup> Samuel Popkin et al., "Comment: What Have You Done for Me Lately? Toward An Investment Theory of Voting," *American Political Science Review* 70, no. 03 (1976): 787.

<sup>572</sup> Althaus, *Collective Preferences*, 12.

interests and values. Mere political awareness is costly; and, like most of what are now recognized as 'collective goods,' absent individual possibilities of realization, it will not be supplied or often even demanded unless some sort of subsidy ... is supplied by someone.<sup>573</sup>

One problem with an ignorant populace is that it is more susceptible to what has been called Gresham's Law of political information: bad information drives out good information.<sup>574</sup> In other words, like the principle in economics ("bad money drives out good") from which its name derives, exposure to bad (false, misleading, irrelevant) information mutes the effects of having accurate information. In an experimental study, less knowledgeable participants made worse decisions when they received both trustworthy and untrustworthy pieces of information.<sup>575</sup> Instead of disregarding the untrustworthy information, as the more knowledgeable did, the less knowledgeable participants took it into account and made resultingly poorer choices on the basis of it. Hence, a politically-ignorant population is more susceptible to all manner of misinformation and political dirty tricks. As might be expected, the politically-ignorant population of the United States *is* targeted with misinformation and dirty tricks, most effectively perhaps by manipulating the perceived political options on offer.<sup>576</sup>

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<sup>573</sup> Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 26.

<sup>574</sup> Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*, 78-81.

<sup>575</sup> Cheryl Boudreau, "Gresham's Law of Political Communication: How Citizens Respond to Conflicting Information," *Political Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>576</sup> Andrew Sabl, "Exploiting the Clueless: Heresthetic, Overload, and Rational Ignorance," in *Manipulating Democracy: Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media*, ed. Wayne Le Cheminant and John M. Parrish, 229-244 (New York: Routledge, 2011).

An ignorant electorate is incapable of making voting decisions in accord with their own values or even self-interest.<sup>577</sup> And a knowledgeable elite in the midst of a majority of ignoramuses can lead to the frustration, if not complete betrayal, of democratic ideals. When political knowledge and participation are concentrated among the relatively wealthy – which is precisely the case in the United States<sup>578</sup> – then democracy veers ever closer to oligarchy.<sup>579</sup>

In-depth, qualitative studies of the poor in the United States reveal that they live in “an impoverished information world.... in which mass media exposure does not yield new information to assist them and one in which interpersonal channels are closed.”<sup>580</sup> Since the news media contains little information of practical relevance for improving their situation, the poor instead tend to use media to escape from the pressures of daily life through entertainment. While more advantaged people use the news media to learn about politics, the poor tend to use informal channels, like family members.<sup>581</sup> However, these informal channels are mainly used to gain information relevant to localized concerns, not the distant – and seemingly irrelevant – realm of politics.<sup>582</sup> (The internet may help to reduce the knowledge gap, by providing a greater diversity of news sources – some of

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<sup>577</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>578</sup> Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>579</sup> Based on a comprehensive study of who actually exerts lawmaking power in the country, oligarchy is the *de facto* form of government in the United States (Gilens and Page, 2014).

<sup>580</sup> Elfreda A. Chatman and Victoria EM Pendleton, "Knowledge Gap, Information-Seeking and the Poor," *The Reference Librarian* 23, no. 49-50 (1995): 139.

<sup>581</sup> Amanda Spink and Charles Cole, "Information and Poverty: Information-Seeking Channels Used by African American Low-Income Households," *Library & Information Science Research* 23, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>582</sup> Elfreda A. Chatman, "The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science (1986-1998)* 47, no. 3 (1996).



which, unlike mainstream outlets, may provide perspectives the poor find relevant and useful.)<sup>583</sup>

These dynamics, and their counterpart – the tendency of the wealthier to acquire and use information to enact their political preferences – creates a knowledge gap separating those of low and high socioeconomic status.<sup>584</sup> This knowledge gap matters a lot, because ignorance of specific, policy-relevant facts is what separates actual preferences from “revealed preferences,” that is, voting decisions.<sup>585</sup> Ignorance is what makes it possible for people to vote against their interests and values – or not to vote, again to the detriment of their interests and values. Since the poorer and less knowledgeable are worse at enacting their preferences by voting, the richer and more knowledgeable exert disproportionate power by default. As Philip Converse observed, due to knowledge gaps “upper social strata across history have much more predictably supported conservative or rightist parties and movements than lower strata have supported leftist parties and movements.”<sup>586</sup> Ignorant lower strata (or an ignorant majority) lack the knowledge required to link their values and self-interest to a political party or program, biasing political power in favor of those few who do know how to link their values and self-interest to political action.

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<sup>583</sup> Goh, Debbie. "Narrowing the Knowledge Gap The Role of Alternative Online Media in an Authoritarian Press System." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2015). However, this study was performed in Singapore, where high-speed internet is universally available.

<sup>584</sup> Emanuel Gaziano and Cecilie Gaziano, “Social Control, Social Change and the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis,” in *Mass Media, Social Control and Social Change: A Macrosocial Perspective*, ed. David Demers and Kasisomayajula Viswanath, 117-136 (Iowa City: Iowa State University Press, 1999).

<sup>585</sup> Martin Gilens, "Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>586</sup> Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in *Political Psychology: Key Readings*, ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius, 181-200 (New York: Psychology Press, 2004): 196.

Not only is an ignorant population incapable of making fully rational political decisions, but the little the public does know is unlikely to be used effectively – and may even be used in a way that causes serious errors.<sup>587</sup> Think of a child who knows how to turn on a car’s ignition, but not how to drive; as the saying goes, “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” In the political realm, the dangerous thing is a mass of largely-ignorant citizens who use ideological shortcuts to make political decisions. While much has been made of voters’ use of heuristics and shortcuts<sup>588</sup> – which are hoped to make up for ignorance – they are only as useful as the (limited) information they operate with.<sup>589</sup> They may work well for the politically knowledgeable (who do not need them), but for the ignorant (who need them), they are worse than useless.<sup>590</sup>

In addition to garden-variety political ignorance, there is the phenomenon of “pluralistic ignorance”: not knowing, or being wrong, about what the rest of the population thinks about political issues. Pluralistic ignorance tends to run in a conservative direction;

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<sup>587</sup> Ilya Somin, "Knowledge about Ignorance: New Directions in the Study of Political Information," *Critical Review* 18, no. 1-3 (2006).

<sup>588</sup> E.g., Paul M. Sniderman et al., *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 14-27.

<sup>589</sup> Bartels, "Uninformed Votes." Jeffrey Friedman observes:

The case for heuristics as crucial aids to decision making comes down to the fact that they allow people to focus on tractable quantities of particularly important information. The use of a heuristic, in other words, requires the user to deploy interpretations that assign disproportionate significance to the type of information highlighted by the heuristic. While the revisionist scholars did not dwell on the interpretive dimension of heuristics, they did point out that a good heuristic is better than a mountain of irrelevant or misleading information. However, they failed to recognize that conversely, a bad heuristic is worse than no information at all, and that the difference between a good heuristic and a bad one lies in the accuracy of the interpretation of political and socio-economic realities on which it is based. ... To establish the reasonableness of heuristics use, it is not enough to show that citizens use heuristics; one must appeal to second-order considerations that suggest the epistemic adequacy of the specific heuristics they use, and this is something that the researchers have failed to do. ... [H]euristics users are assumed to be able to know somehow when they have found just what they need: the right nugget of heuristic information. But how they could know that this information adequately substitutes for the information they do not know—unless they already know it—is as much a mystery in the heuristics literature as it is in the literature on the economics of information. (Friedman, forthcoming, 261, 263)

<sup>590</sup> Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science* (2001).

that is, we tend to think the majority is more hawkish, conservative, and resistant to change than it really is.<sup>591</sup> This tendency can inhibit the growth of movements for social change, as the inaccurate belief that the majority does not want change can sap would-be reformers' enthusiasm, and make proposals for change seem "unrealistic."

There is considerable evidence as well for other psychological phenomena that tend toward conservatism. These include "cognitive conservatism," whereby people resist changing their attitudes and beliefs by selectively attending to exclusively supportive information, and the "status quo effect," whereby people express a strong preference for whatever the current state of affairs is, even if alternatives would be more desirable.<sup>592</sup> Also, more knowledgeable people exhibit a tendency to distrust *messages* that diverge from their own preferences, while less knowledgeable people exhibit distrust of messages coming from *people* with divergent preferences. Together, these twin processes "make it less likely that novel, well-informed viewpoints will penetrate preexistent beliefs, creating a conservative bias within the communication process."<sup>593</sup>

Whether caused by the structure of the media, educational, or economic systems – or a combination – widespread political ignorance and the knowledge gap spells serious trouble for democracy. Ignorance makes people less likely to vote or otherwise participate in politics, while making it more difficult to translate preferences into voting decisions. Lack of knowledge also makes people more vulnerable to the influence of false and misleading information. The knowledge gap only adds to the power of economic elites,

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<sup>591</sup> Shamir, "Pluralistic Ignorance," 157-158.

<sup>592</sup> John T. Jost and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "The Role of Stereotyping in System-Justification and the Production of False Consciousness," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 33, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>593</sup> Toh-Kyeong Ahn et al., "Communication, Influence, and Informational Asymmetries among Voters," *Political Psychology* 31, no. 5 (2010): 783.

while putting restraints on the potential political power of the have-nots. Lastly, pluralistic ignorance and forms of cognitive conservatism put a damper on social change, even – perhaps especially – when it is most needed.

### **xiii. What can be done?**

*“As a result of radio broadcasting, there will probably develop during the twentieth century either chaos or a world-order of civilization. Whether it shall be one or the other will depend largely upon whether broadcasting be used as a tool of education or as an instrument of selfish greed. So far, our American radio interests have thrown their major influence on the side of greed.... There has never been in the entire history of the United States an example of mismanagement and lack of vision so colossal and far-reaching in its consequences as our turning of the radio channels almost exclusively into commercial hands. ... I believe we are dealing here with one of the most crucial issues that was ever presented to civilization at any time in its entire history.”*

- Joy Elmer Morgan, Chair of the National Committee on Education by Radio, speaking in 1931/2

To those listening to Morgan’s words in the early 1930s, he may have seemed unduly alarmist. Radio was still in its infancy, television was decades away, and the crisis presented by the Great Depression would have seemed far more immediate and visceral than the wonky issue of radio regulation. Yet from today’s perspective, Morgan seems eerily prescient. He was speaking at a time when commercial radio stations were battling with university-based, educational radio stations over access to the radio spectrum. The

Roosevelt administration eventually decided to favor commercial radio over educational radio. This set a precedent that has been followed ever since, influencing as well how access to the television spectrum would be granted. This decision ensured that the predominant use of radio and television would be for commercial purposes, with public information and education as an afterthought.

Morgan's alarmism would need time to be vindicated. What was a sapling in the 1930s has fully grown today, and we are now in a position to judge our media system by its fruits. And its fruits are a massively ignorant population, divided into a majority having very little political knowledge with which to inform their political decisions, and a small minority bitterly divided into two polarized political camps. The way our political system operates in practice is objectively, empirically best-described as an oligarchy.<sup>594</sup> Wealth has become concentrated at record levels, with little hope of upward mobility for those without it.<sup>595</sup> Climate change poses a mortal threat to human civilization, but instead of concerted action to avoid its consequences, we proceed toward catastrophe without so much as slowing down.

And at the core of the greatest problems we collectively face lies information; or, more accurately, a lack of it. There is no shortage of proposed solutions to the monumental problems humanity faces, yet they remain largely outside of public debate because they are not widely known – and they are not widely known because they are not extensively featured, discussed, and debated in the media. At the same time, technological developments have exponentially added to the power of the media – the *means of*

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<sup>594</sup> Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>595</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

*communication* – to disseminate information. Yet the commercial media, constrained by many of the same political-economic factors that govern and limit politicians, fails staggeringly to disseminate the information needed. Morgan was right.

The media, the most powerful means of communication available, is merely a tool. It can be used to entertain, to transmit information, to educate, to persuade, and to propagandize. The effects the media has on society are not inherent to the tool itself; they are solely dependent on how the tool is used. How can the media be used differently, to produce beneficial effects?

First, there are other countries' media systems to look to. Political ignorance is epidemic in the United States, but other culturally-similar countries have levels of political ignorance only half as high. Comparative studies of media systems and political knowledge in the United States and Europe point to the level of commercialization in the media as the culprit. In countries like Denmark and Finland, where the commercial model is replaced with a public service model of the media, news quality is higher, levels of political knowledge are higher, and knowledge gaps between socioeconomic strata are narrowed to the point of vanishing.<sup>596</sup> An unregulated, commercial media may do well at providing entertainment; but it is an abject failure at providing necessary political information. Secondly, there is a lot we already know about media effects that can help us in reforming or re-regulating media systems. Contrary to the neoliberal view of society – namely, as Margaret Thatcher said, “there is no such thing as society,” and we are all independent, individual consumers and producers – humans have evolved to be extremely reliant on

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<sup>596</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, “The Political Economy of Mass Media: Implications for Informed Citizenship,” in *Manipulating Democracy: Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media*, ed. Wayne Le Cheminant and John M. Parrish, 209-228 (New York: Routledge, 2011): 212-216.

human society. Our dependence on society not only for survival but for a broad range of needs and wants leaves us highly susceptible to social influence; and the media can be a major source of social influence.<sup>597</sup> Reaching even those without interest in politics, entertainment programs can be used to promote pro-social behavior, and such attempts have proven effective in the past.<sup>598</sup> In explaining social problems, the news media should use narrative stories about individuals alongside citing facts and figures. The evidence suggests that this is the most effective way to communicate the importance of social problems that need to be addressed.<sup>599</sup> And when discussing dangers faced by society, the media must ensure that possible solutions are also presented, or else the information about danger is likely only to be avoided and ignored.<sup>600</sup>

To prevent manipulative framing of issues in the media, disputants can first be brought together to agree on an account of the *basis* of the issue: the facts and information relevant to the dispute. They can then proceed to make their arguments in the media, but now without the strategic, manipulative use of incomplete information.<sup>601</sup> Having an agreed factual basis for a debate presented in the media makes it much harder for disputants to frame issues in completely incompatible ways. Debaters would still be entitled to their own opinions; they would no longer be entitled to their own facts. Political extremism may be lessened by media intervention. The schemas we have can deceive us into thinking we know more than we really do – in other words, what we *do*

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<sup>597</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and the Mysteries of Solitude," in *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach et al., 213-217 (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>598</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 282-283.

<sup>599</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 190-192.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-206.

<sup>601</sup> James S. Fishkin, "Manipulation and Democratic Theory," in *Manipulating Democracy: Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media*, ed. Wayne Le Cheminant and John M. Parrish, 31-40 (New York: Routledge, 2011).

know can blind us to how much we *do not* know. This helps to explain the obduracy with which extreme partisans hold to their beliefs: our theories and beliefs really do *seem* bulletproof. However, this illusion can be dispelled when we try to explain the mechanisms by which our political beliefs actually work.<sup>602</sup> Forced to face the true extent of our knowledge up close, we can better see its gaps; and in turn, begin to hold to our beliefs with less tenacity. For instance, a belief that paying for a larger military provides more security is intuitively plausible, and is easy to hold with absolute certainty. But an examination of the precise *mechanisms* by which a larger military reduces security threats forces open questions about the reactions of other countries, potential arms races, signaling aggression to others, etc. These questions certainly will not in themselves dissuade, but they focus attention on what would otherwise be unexamined assumptions. By provoking readers, listeners, and viewers to examine the social mechanisms implied by their political beliefs, the media could open the door to more effective and productive debates between people more aware of the gaps, hasty assumptions, and leaps of faith inherent in their beliefs. Also, the persuasive power of the media can be tamed through preventive measures. Simply forewarning people that they are about to face an attempt at persuasion makes them more critical, and less easy to persuade.<sup>603</sup> Educating children about the media has been shown to reduce their susceptibility to media effects, and media literacy may also limit cultivation effects.<sup>604</sup> Making media literacy a standard part of the school curriculum is likely to help lessen the harmful persuasive effects of the media.

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<sup>602</sup> Philip M. Fernbach et al., "Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 6 (2013).

<sup>603</sup> Perloff, *The Dynamics*, 129.

<sup>604</sup> Perse, "Meta-Analysis."



Lastly, in order to have a truly autonomous public opinion and a government by informed consent, it is necessary that the media directly reflect the multiplicity of opinions and views in the public – or the plurality of publics.<sup>605</sup> This is an ideal that is terribly far from being attained in the United States. While there is certainly a diversity of opinion within the U.S. media, this is a diversity largely restricted to a narrow spectrum of political ideas: mainstream liberalism and conservatism, mirroring the positions of the Democratic and Republican parties. Many other political currents, from paleoconservatism and isolationism to socialism and anarchism, are excluded. The true multiplicity of opinions and views in the plurality of publics exists only in corners of the internet, where few are exposed to them. In the United States’ marketplace of ideas, the widest variety of political ideas is not on display; it is hidden under tables covered by piles of the mass-produced ideas of mainstream politics. To live up to the role the media must play in order for democracy to function – to provide a free and functioning marketplace of ideas – the media must begin to open its doors to the diversity of excluded political perspectives. Commercial considerations should play no role in such a fundamental issue of inestimable importance. If these ideas seem to impinge upon an sacred ideal of democracy, that of freedom of the press, it is worthwhile to remind oneself of A. J. Liebling’s quip that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.”<sup>606</sup> True freedom of the press would be a guarantee of free expression of diverse ideas, whether that result issue felicitously from private ownership of commercial media companies, from government regulation, or from social and democratic ownership of the press. The worldwide history of the modern mass media

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<sup>605</sup> de Lima, *Mídia: Teoria*; Porto, “Frame Diversity.”

<sup>606</sup> Quoted in Seldes, *The Great Thoughts*, 243.

has long featured a tension between freedom of the press (or its owners) and its social responsibility to provide independent, diverse, objective information.<sup>607</sup> It is important to remember that freedom of the press is simply a means to an end: a population with ample access to a fully-functioning marketplace of ideas. If that goal is best achieved through private ownership and some sort of regulation, so be it; likewise if that goal is best achieved through democratic ownership and control of the media. The true spirit of the free press is agnostic as to the means by which its freedom is assured.

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<sup>607</sup> Marcial Murciano, "As Políticas de Comunicação Face aos Desafios do Novo Milénio," in *Comunicação, Economia e Poder*, ed. Helena Sousa, 103-126 (Porto: Porto Editora, 2006).

## Chapter 5

### The Supply Side –

#### What Affects the Supply of Information Provided by the Media

*“Thus the environment with which our public opinions deal is refracted in many ways, by censorship and privacy at the source, by physical and social barriers at the other end, by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony. These limitations upon our access to that environment combine with the obscurity and complexity of the facts themselves to thwart clearness and justice of perception, to substitute misleading fictions for workable ideas, and to deprive us of adequate checks upon those who consciously strive to mislead.”*

- Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

Heretofore we have been discussing the biases that operate within the human mind, which influence how we process information and develop our beliefs and opinions. We have seen that the media influences public opinion by its choice of what information to present and how to present it. But what information does the media present? Does it present a broad, pluralistic sample of the political ideas among the population, and does it provide without bias the sets of facts supporting and sustaining the various political ideologies in circulation? Or are there pressures acting upon the media that constrain it, making it more likely that one or another political ideology will be widespread through a disproportionate presentation of certain arguments, facts, and ways of presenting them? This chapter will analyze the political and economic influences acting upon the media, shaping the supply of information accessible to the population.

According to the democratic ideal, political decisions are *ultimately* made by all of the people, although *proximately* they are made through the people's representatives.<sup>608</sup> These representatives, although they alone have the authority to exercise political power, should be constrained by the will of the people: if they exercise their authority in a manner displeasing to the people, they should quickly lose their authority and be replaced by a more obedient representative. The "will of the people," however, is a tricky concept. The people rarely if ever speak with one voice; more commonly, there will be great disagreements and frequent conflict over what "the people" want. These conflicts and disagreements, alongside consensus and agreements, comprise the public sphere: the imaginary realm where citizens learn about, discuss, and debate public issues. The hope, central to democratic theory, is that through open debate in the public sphere, the best ideas will carry the day.<sup>609</sup> This debate will (hopefully) produce an informed public opinion, and an informed public opinion will in turn influence democratic representatives to govern wisely, in accordance with the winning ideas produced by and within the public sphere.

The public sphere consists of all communication of any sort that deals with political issues, and the biggest, most influential component of the public sphere in modern societies is the media. The media not only provides the majority of the information necessary for political discussions, but also provides the space for political elites to debate in front of millions of citizens – and these elite debates influence the innumerable small-scale debates among friends, co-workers, on internet forums, at town hall meetings, and the like. The

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<sup>608</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1967).

<sup>609</sup> C. Edwin Baker, *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 11.

media, then, is the cornerstone of modern democracy: without the media (or a *properly functioning* media), there is no public sphere; and without a public sphere, there can be no self-government. Hence legal scholar Edwin Baker's forceful conclusion that "a country is democratic only to the extent that the media, as well as elections, are structurally egalitarian and politically salient."<sup>610</sup>

For the media to play its ideal role as the infrastructure of the public sphere, it must at the very least provide unbiased information and space to all those who have an argument to set before the public.<sup>611</sup> It must produce an ecology of information that is entirely neutral with regard to any particular idea, meme, or ideology. ("Demand-side" biases are a separate matter – even in a media environment providing an unbiased supply of information, in-group bias for example could cause a population to preferentially adopt ideas that paint their nation or ethnic group in a uniformly positive light.) Just as heavy pesticide use can eliminate the food source of predators who feed on insects, reducing their overall numbers, an information ecology favoring some information over others will affect the overall distribution of beliefs and ideas within a population. The media, therefore, must provide information about the world 'without fear or favor,' to ensure that the distribution of ideas, opinions, and ideologies in a population is the result of free and fair debate in the public sphere.

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>611</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 28-29. Schudson provides a fuller list of requirements for a functional media system, including evoking empathy and understanding. His fourth goal, that "the market should be the criterion for the production of news," i.e., give the people what they want, may be more democratic in a market sense; but if carried to its logical conclusion would be a disaster. The news would (further) devolve into little more than a daily review of porn, violence, and sports, with a few political sex scandals or war coverage thrown in.

To what extent the media actually does so is the question tackled by scholars and social scientists in the field of political economy of media.<sup>612</sup> The name given to this field of inquiry reveals the primary forces operating on the media that affect what information it transmits: they are political and economic. In fact, they can be both; and whether it even makes sense to draw a distinction between the two harkens back to the days when the discipline of economics was called “political economy,” a recognition that neither politics nor economics operate in independent realms separate from each other. As we will see, political-economic pressures powerfully influence the media, distorting the information ecology of the public sphere in complex but broadly predictable ways.

### **i. A brief history of the press**

*“If newspapers are useful in overthrowing tyrants, it is only to establish a tyranny of their own.”*

- James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat*

For the vast majority of human history, the only way for information to spread from one person to another was through speech. To learn about what was happening among a distant tribe dozens of kilometers away, one would have to visit them oneself, or listen to the report of an emissary or a fellow tribesman who had visited them. With the development of written language, this limitation was only barely surmounted: language barriers and widespread illiteracy were still powerful impediments to information flows between groups of people, and scrolls still needed to be delivered. The first Christians, for

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<sup>612</sup> E.g., Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication* (New York: Sage, 2009).

instance, could not spread their new religion using pamphlets or books, still less radio or TV shows – mediated communication was limited to a handwritten gospel here and an epistle there. The first Christians were evangelists because they had to be; there was no other way for them to spread the information their faith comprised but by preaching to whomever would listen.

After handwritten letters and books, the next major developments in communication occurred in China with the invention of printing in the seventh century,<sup>613</sup> and later in Africa with the development of the “talking drum.” By encoding spoken messages into a drumbeat, which could be heard kilometers away and retransmitted by another drummer, messages could be communicated over a hundred kilometers in the space of an hour.<sup>614</sup> Meanwhile, in Europe the only way to communicate significant amounts of information was through letters; and only by the fourteenth century were mail routes organized between major trading cities, while it took until the end of the seventeenth century for the mail to be accessible to the general public.<sup>615</sup>

While the first printing press with movable metal type was invented in Korea in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, soon thereafter Gutenberg introduced the printing press to Europe.<sup>616</sup> Its impact was inestimable. By vastly reducing the amount of human labor required to reproduce books, the printing press allowed for many more copies, and kinds, of books to be produced. Having more copies of books stabilized and preserved existing knowledge (which had been subject to greater change over time in the age of oral and manuscript

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<sup>613</sup> Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (New York: Polity, 2010): 13.

<sup>614</sup> James Gleick, *The Information* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011): 13-27.

<sup>615</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991): 16.

<sup>616</sup> Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 13.

transmission), and having more kinds of books resulted in more widespread critiques of authority.<sup>617</sup> The printing press was necessary for Martin Luther to spread his critique of the Catholic Church, and once his message had spread far and convinced many, the printing press allowed for the development of the first political propaganda, inspiring and fueling the massive bloodletting of Europe's religious wars.<sup>618</sup>

With the rise of newspapers in the sixteenth century, the threat to authority represented by the printing press only increased.<sup>619</sup> Governments quickly began to censor newspapers, and used them to shore up rather than threaten their power.<sup>620</sup> Punishments for printing objectionable material were harsh, including breaking limbs and using an awl to bore through the tongue.<sup>621</sup> Nonetheless, seditious material continued to be printed and distributed. While governments could exercise control over printers within their borders, Europe's political diversity allowed for critical works to be published in one country and then imported into the target country. Thanks to the ineffectiveness of state censorship, the small coterie of educated people in various European countries had access to ideas that challenged the legitimacy of their political and religious leaders. This educated elite began to develop a political consciousness that rejected the absolute sovereignty of kings, and instead demanded to be ruled by general laws approved by public opinion.<sup>622</sup>

The printing press created the conditions necessary for the emergence of a public sphere: a disaggregated network (much like the internet) of readers, writers, thinkers,

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 69-73.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>620</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 22.

<sup>621</sup> Jonathan M. Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 17.

<sup>622</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 54.



discussants, and disputants who formed public opinion through their books, pamphlets, newspapers, and conversations. It was in this nascent public sphere that the seeds of the Enlightenment, and the American and French revolutions, were nurtured and grew.<sup>623</sup> Recognizing the power of the printing press and public opinion, Napoleon warned that “four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than 100,000 bayonets,”<sup>624</sup> and Edmund Burke noted that “there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all.”<sup>625</sup> From its very beginnings, the media was a revolutionary force, as was recognized in a poem circulating through Germany at the time of the French revolution:

The magic word before whose power  
Even the people’s masters cower.  
Flapping their wigs officiously –  
Prick up your ears; the word – it is publicity.<sup>626</sup>

That the media was considered to be such a powerful force is surprising considering how few people actually read the political press: only five percent of the British population at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>627</sup> A truly *mass* media was still in embryo. And this was exactly how the literate elite in Europe wished it to be: it would not do to have the working masses educated, reading about politics, increasing their expectations, and making them discontent with the toil and drudgery that was supposed to be their lot in life.<sup>628</sup> In

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<sup>623</sup> Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 85. However, despite the “public” modifier, this sphere was rather small historically. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century U.S., “[r]eaders were relatively rare birds, not participants in a broad, ongoing, and institutionalized rational-critical discourse.” (Schudson, 1995, 196)

<sup>624</sup> Quoted in Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 88.

<sup>625</sup> Quoted in Baker, *Media Concentration*, 5.

<sup>626</sup> Quoted in Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 70.

<sup>627</sup> Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004): 41.

<sup>628</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 102; Starr, *The Creation*, 40-41.

the southern American colonies, the knowledge gap between rulers and ruled was much the same as in Europe; even worse, Virginia and Maryland outlawed printers. A royal governor of Virginia wrote to London in 1671, "I thank God, there are no free-schools, nor printing... for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!"<sup>629</sup> God, however, did not keep Virginia from learning and printing for long.

In 1735, a printer named John Peter Zenger published articles attacking a royal governor's abuses of power. Although there was no contest that by the letter of the law Zenger was guilty of seditious libel, his lawyer successfully used a jury nullification strategy, convincing the jurors to disregard the law and rule according to conscience and reason.<sup>630</sup> News of the verdict spread throughout the colonies, solidifying the idea that the proper role of the press was to protect popular liberty by scrutinizing government: it was to be the public's watchdog.<sup>631</sup> Royal officials soon gave up trying to suppress seditious libel, allowing the colonial press room to criticize the royal administration.

Another key pre-revolutionary development was the British Parliament's 1765 imposition of a heavy tax on newspapers, pamphlets, and other printed material. This helped radicalize the American press, leading many newspapers to join in a campaign against British rule.<sup>632</sup> During the revolutionary war, the press came to be associated with the cause of freedom; and after winning independence, the American revolutionaries were quick to enshrine freedom of the press in the Constitution. This freedom was conceived less

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<sup>629</sup> Quoted in Starr, *The Creation*, 53.

<sup>630</sup> Clay S. Conrad, *Jury Nullification: The Evolution of a Doctrine* (Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1998): 32-38.

<sup>631</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 59.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-68.

as journalistic independence from government interference, and more as the freedom of individuals to access a printing press to disseminate their views<sup>633</sup> – and it was a legally-guaranteed freedom for which Europeans and others would have to wait over a century to enjoy themselves.<sup>634</sup>

The American Revolution ushered in radical changes in society, foremost among them the free-school, the printing press, and the Post Office. While European nations taxed publications as a means of revenue and control, the revolutionary United States provided *subsidies* to newspapers in the form of artificially cheap postal rates.<sup>635</sup> (In today's dollars, on a per-person basis, this subsidy would amount to roughly \$6 billion annually.)<sup>636</sup> A more indirect subsidy to the press was the network of locally-financed and -controlled schools, which provided a much bigger market of the literate and educated for newspapers. Together, these forms of state intervention overcame the problems earlier political thinkers believed would make a large republic impossible: by providing common schools and tying together a lightly populated, widespread territory through the political press and the post office, the U.S. created a coherent, unified public sphere that was the envy of the contemporary world. Not only was the (free) population the best educated in the world, but the U.S. had more newspapers per capita than any other country.<sup>637</sup> European visitors to the United States in the early 1800s were amazed by the number of newspapers in wide circulation, even in the boondocks. Alexis de Tocqueville, traveling in frontier Michigan in

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<sup>633</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 21-22.

<sup>634</sup> Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 182-183.

<sup>635</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 16.

<sup>636</sup> C. Edwin Baker, "Testimony before the Subcommittee on Courts and Competition Policy, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Congress of the United States," in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 128-130 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 128.

<sup>637</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Blowing the Roof off the Twenty-First Century: Media, Politics, and the Struggle for Post-Capitalist Democracy* (New York: NYU Press, 2014): 232.

1831, wrote about his visit to a crude cabin on a back road: “You think that you have finally reached the home of the American peasant. Mistake.”<sup>638</sup> The resident of the cabin turned out to be literate, and even offered de Tocqueville advice on how to make France prosperous. Just across the northern border in British North America (Canada), however, things were different. Untouched by revolutionary transformation, Canada had few schools, low literacy, limited postal service, and high rates for newspaper delivery creating a relative scarcity.<sup>639</sup>

The early American press was rabidly partisan from its very beginning. (In fact, the first political parties in the U.S. grew out of the organizational base provided by newspapers.)<sup>640</sup> Federalist newspapers railed against the Democratic-Republicans (including Thomas Jefferson), and Democratic-Republican newspapers pilloried the Federalists (including Alexander Hamilton).<sup>641</sup> The rancor and vitriol characteristic of the partisan press was enough to sour George Washington and Thomas Jefferson on newspapers; Jefferson lamented in 1807 that “[n]othing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.”<sup>642</sup> As the party system developed, newspapers remained key parts of established political parties, and the *sine qua non* of upstart parties seeking a foothold in the political realm. Editors were more activists than journalists, and often served as party committee members and convention organizers. As late as 1850, some 80-90 percent of newspapers in the United States had a party affiliation.<sup>643</sup>

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<sup>638</sup> Quoted in Starr, *The Creation*, 48.

<sup>639</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 48-49, 90-91.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>641</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 21.

<sup>642</sup> Quoted in Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 27.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Meanwhile in Britain, the 1800s witnessed the growth of combative, radical newspapers advancing the cause of the working class.<sup>644</sup> At first, the British government responded by levying heavy stamp taxes (as they had done in the American colonies) on newspapers, such that only those marketed to the wealthy could survive. However, the radical press developed an underground network to produce and distribute their newspapers, surviving thousands of prosecutions and property seizures, until by 1836 the radical, unstamped press enjoyed a larger circulation than legal newspapers. In that year, the British authorities changed strategies; stamp taxes were reduced and coercive powers were increased in order to, in the words of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, “protect the capitalist” and “put down the unstamped papers.”<sup>645</sup> These measures forced the radical press to increase their prices, but the papers’ audience found creative ways to continue reading – and the radical press continued to grow in circulation and influence. What finally destroyed the radical press in England was not government coercion, but free market forces: specifically, the advertising market. When the government lifted taxes on advertising, newspapers came to rely more on advertising as a primary source of revenue. This development favored newspapers catering to a wealthier clientele, for which advertisers would pay more to gain access. As printing technology advanced, more expensive printing machines became a necessity to survive in the newspaper market. The newer machines could produce ever more copies, which could then be sold at an initial loss that was more than made up for through higher advertising revenue. The radical press then found itself at a severe competitive disadvantage: its working class readership was not

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<sup>644</sup> James Curran, *Media and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 79-103; Jonathan Hardy, *Critical Political Economy of the Media: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014): xiii-xiv.

<sup>645</sup> Quoted in Curran, *Media and Power*, 83.

highly prized by advertisers, so the radical press could never match the “respectable” press in advertising revenue, and could not afford to keep up with costly technological advances. Eventually, at the hands of market forces it met the fate that decades of government repression had failed to seal.<sup>646</sup>

This same development in the newspaper market occurred in the U.S. as well.<sup>647</sup> Its effects were not only to advantage papers catering to wealthier audiences (a smaller problem, perhaps, in the less class-stratified society of the nineteenth century United States), but to change the way the press saw itself. The traditional republican conception of the newspaper as a means of engaging citizens in the realm of politics began to fade, and a new conception took hold: that of the newspaper as a means of attracting consumers whose attention could then be sold to advertisers.

Although ushered in by market forces, Paul Manning points out that these changes were “not the consequence of the preferences of particular individuals; rather it is the *structure* of the advertising market which produces a tendency to disadvantage the subordinate and to privilege the powerful.”<sup>648</sup> In more anodyne language, James Hamilton explains that “[t]he shift from a party press to independence is a story of brand location, market segmentation [more accurately: conglomeration], economies of scale, technological change, and advertising incentives.”<sup>649</sup> These changes were not merely the result of

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<sup>646</sup> Of course, this did not reflect individual free will, a decision to read the mass-market press in lieu of the radical press out of individuals’ pure preferences, or even whims. That portion of “the market” had already expressed its preference: for the radical press. The death of the radical press at the (invisible) hands of the market was due to its former, low-income readers refusing to pay a significant premium for information about the outside world.

<sup>647</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 146.

<sup>648</sup> Paul Manning, *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Sage, 2001): 100.

<sup>649</sup> James Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 70.

aggregate “expressed” consumer preferences: news readers did not simply *prefer* the cheaper, wider circulation, advertising-heavy papers.<sup>650</sup>

This development had contradictory effects on the independence of the press. As newspapers broke free of their strong links with political parties, they found themselves under another powerful influence: advertisers. As Jürgen Habermas argues, “[t]he history of the big daily papers in the second half of the nineteenth century proves that the press itself became manipulable to the extent that it became commercialized ... it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere.”<sup>651</sup> However, the increased revenues made possible by advertising also allowed for the development of (very expensive) investigative reporting, or muckraking.<sup>652</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the process of “professionalization” gradually changed the intensely partisan press into the neutral, “objective” press of today.<sup>653</sup> The percentage of articles containing verifiable data rather than opinions increased steadily, along with the share of articles relying on official

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<sup>650</sup> For theoretical and historical illustrations, see C. Edwin Baker, “Advertising and a Democratic Press,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 140, no. 6 (1992): 2107-2119. He summarizes the consequences of the rise of advertising in newspaper revenues (from 44% in 1879 to 71% in 1929):

Advertising generally favors the paper with relatively more affluent readers, subsidizing the content that they prefer. Even if this favoritism does not drive papers with competing perspectives out of business, the subsidy magnifies the normal inequality of the poor having less money to pay for media products than the wealthy. A subsidy for papers preferred by the more affluent dramatically biases our information environment – in the direction opposite of what the democratic one-person-one-vote principle would require. The poor must either pay almost the full cost of the media product they prefer, if it is available, or purchase media content that they would not choose if both their favored and the other paper were sold at full cost. In contrast, advertising works to the benefit of the more affluent: their preferred media product is made available at considerably below cost. (Baker, 1992, 2127)

<sup>651</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 185.

<sup>652</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 262.

<sup>653</sup> “[T]here are economic reasons to expect, historical evidence to suggest, and contemporary consciousness to indicate that both the decline of political partisanship and the rise of objectivity were at least partly caused by newspapers’ need to gain the circulation on which advertising income depends. These content changes corresponded to a decline in product differentiation on which competition depends. Thus, the increased role of advertising provides a major explanation for the decline of competition and the increased local monopoly of the daily newspapers.” (Baker, 1992, 2131-2132)

sources.<sup>654</sup> At the same time, there developed centralized systems of supplying and distributing news: the Associated Press in the United States, the Canadian Press in Canada, Agence France-Presse in France, and Reuters in Britain.<sup>655</sup> Alongside the professionalization of newspapers, these centralized systems of news provision tended to produce a more uniform, homogenous style of reporting. This style is characterized by a focus not on the world itself, but on what is “new” about the world – very recent events, preferably dramatic – without providing much political analysis or historical context.<sup>656</sup>

Not everyone was pleased with this development. Joseph Cannon, a former Speaker of the House in the early twentieth century, complained that the newly nonpartisan, professionalized and commercialized press failed to present political arguments as well as the partisan press had; further, “[t]he cut of a Congressman’s whiskers or his clothes is [considered] a better subject for a human interest story than what he says in debate.”<sup>657</sup> The British sociologist Leonard Hobhouse criticized the turn-of-the-century press as “more and more the monopoly of a few rich men,” which instead of being “the organ of democracy” had lamentably become “the sounding board for whatever ideas commend themselves to the great material interests.”<sup>658</sup> Journalists too were critical of the professional turn; Upton Sinclair decried the need of professional journalists to adapt their opinions to the “pocketbook of a new owner,”<sup>659</sup> and John Swinton, editor of the *New York Sun*, confessed of his profession that:

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<sup>654</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 49.

<sup>655</sup> Debra M. Clarke, *Journalism and Political Exclusion: Social Conditions of News Production and Reception* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2014): 65.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>657</sup> Quoted in Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 56.

<sup>658</sup> Quoted in Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 191.

<sup>659</sup> Quoted in Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008): 74-75.



There is no such thing as an independent press in America. I am paid for keeping my honest opinions out of the paper I am connected with. Any of you who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the street looking for another job. ... We are the tools and vassals of the rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks; they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.<sup>660</sup>

## ii. A brief history of broadcast media

*"Right now, there is a whole, an entire generation that never knew anything that didn't come out of this tube! This tube is the gospel, the ultimate revelation; this tube can make or break presidents, popes, prime ministers; this tube is the most awesome goddamn propaganda force in the whole godless world, and woe is us if it ever falls into the hands of the wrong people..."*

- "Howard Beale" in *Network*, written by Paddy Chayefsky

In the 1910s, when radio was emerging as a technology accessible to hobbyists in the United States, before radio programming in its current form existed, it was primarily a tool for communication and education. For those of us who experienced the internet in the early-to-mid 1990s, this description of pre-broadcast radio in 1920 by Lee de Forest (considered "the father of radio")<sup>661</sup> seems strangely familiar:

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<sup>660</sup> Seldes, *The Great Thoughts*, 405.

<sup>661</sup> Victor Pickard, *America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 9.

It offers the widest limits, the keenest fascination, either for intense competition with others, near and far, or for quiet study and pure enjoyment in the still night hours as you welcome friendly visitors from the whole wide world.<sup>662</sup>

From the whole wide world, to the World Wide Web (www). Just as it seemed to many in the early days of the internet that it would always be a tool for international communication and education, it may have seemed to early radio enthusiasts that the medium would exclusively serve the public good in powerful ways. In the early 1920s, the airwaves were filled with nonprofit stations affiliated mainly with colleges and universities. The commercial stations in existence at the time were largely appendages to bricks-and-mortar businesses like newspapers, department stores, and power companies, and by 1929, few were earning any profits of their own.<sup>663</sup> The business model of radio advertising had not yet been developed. In fact, in the early '20s Herbert Hoover opined that it was “inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service and for news and for entertainment and education to be drowned in advertising chatter,”<sup>664</sup> and the head of publicity for radio manufacturer Westinghouse advocated for the prohibition of radio advertising, claiming that it “would ruin the radio business, for nobody would stand for it.”<sup>665</sup> Even an advertising trade paper, *Printer's Ink*, considered radio an “objectionable advertising medium,” and stated that “the family circle is not a public place, and advertising has no business intruding there unless it is invited.”<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>662</sup> Quoted in Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York: Vintage, 2011): 37.

<sup>663</sup> McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 158.

<sup>664</sup> Quoted in Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 155.

<sup>665</sup> Quoted in Wu, *The Master Switch*, 74.

<sup>666</sup> Quoted in Starr, *The Creation*, 338.

It was not long before commercial stations discovered not only that people *would* stand for radio advertising, but that through advertising, a radio license could become a veritable license to print money. AT&T, realizing it could leverage its monopoly over telephone lines to create the nation's first broadcasting network, became the leader in radio advertising. When radio revenues came primarily from the sale of equipment, it made good business sense to allow as many broadcasters as possible (universities, churches, and other nonprofit entities): the more programming variety available, the more reason to buy a radio, and the more revenue for radio manufacturers. But just as the rise of advertising in newspapers changed that industry's business model, so too did advertising change the logic of the radio business. AT&T could spend more money on each radio program to maximize quality, transmit them via telephone lines to stations all over the country, and recoup its expenses by selling nationwide advertising. As soon as this new business model for radio demonstrated its success, competitors emerged to get a piece of the radio advertising pie. They were not only competing with AT&T for market share, but with the nation's nonprofit, noncommercial stations for radio bandwidth.<sup>667</sup>

In the fight against nonprofit radio stations, the commercial broadcasters united to lobby the Federal Radio Commission for control of the radio spectrum. By 1928, they won: the Commission set aside a majority of radio frequencies for commercial channels, and the market for radio advertising boomed, leaping from barely existing before 1928 to \$172 million annually by 1934.<sup>668</sup> Radio advertising had gone from an insignificant pariah to the dominant force in radio programming in less than a decade.<sup>669</sup> Meanwhile, nonprofit

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<sup>667</sup> Wu, *The Master Switch*, 74-85.

<sup>668</sup> McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 161.

<sup>669</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 356.

broadcasters, starved of the radio spectrum, declined by two thirds from 1927 to 1934.

Between 1921 and 1936, 240 educational stations were established – but by the end of the period 80 percent of them had lost or sold their licenses.<sup>670</sup> The director of the University of Arkansas station (before it went extinct) lamented: “The Commission may boast that it has never cut an educational station off the air. It merely cuts off our head, our arms, and our legs, and then allows us to die a natural death.”<sup>671</sup>

In Britain, on the other hand, commercial broadcasters were unable to secure a foothold before the government decided in 1922 to entrust the future of the medium to a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) monopoly. John Reith, the first general manager of the BBC, decided to use the airwaves to uplift the population, abjuring cheap entertainment in favor of high culture and educational programming. He was profoundly skeptical of commercial broadcasting’s populist sensibilities, arguing that “[h]e who prides himself on giving what he thinks the public wants is often creating a fictitious demand for lower standards which he will then satisfy.”<sup>672</sup> The British public seemed to agree. By 1934, *The Times of London* looked back and called it wise “to entrust broadcasting in this country to a single organization with an independent monopoly and with public service as its primary motive.”<sup>673</sup> The British model was followed in Europe and Japan, while the U.S. model was copied throughout Latin America; in Canada and the Caribbean, a hybrid model was chosen.<sup>674</sup>

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<sup>670</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>671</sup> Quoted in McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 162.

<sup>672</sup> Quoted in Wu, *The Master Switch*, 41.

<sup>673</sup> Quoted in Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 201.

<sup>674</sup> Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 201-204.

The U.S. government, instead of imagining what the future of broadcasting *should* be, merely accommodated the evolution of the radio business model, and used its regulatory power to do the radio industry's bidding.<sup>675</sup> Because the key decisions over radio policy were made in the late 1920s, when business interests were at the height of their power, advertisers set the path the medium would be dependent on for decades.<sup>676</sup> Furthermore, the two main U.S. political parties went into debt to the commercial broadcasters for ads run during the 1928 and 1932 elections, leaving them in a delicate position when it came to regulating the airwaves.<sup>677</sup>

While the U.S. public largely ignored the battle between commercial and nonprofit broadcasters, the losing nonprofits were acutely aware of what was at stake. As a spokesman for an association of educational broadcasters warned in the early 1930s: As a result of radio broadcasting, there will probably develop during the twentieth century either chaos or a world-order of civilization. Whether it shall be one or the other will depend largely upon whether broadcasting be used as a tool of education or as an instrument of selfish greed. So far, our American radio interests have thrown their major influence on the side of greed. ...[C]ommericalized broadcasting as it is now regulated in America may threaten the very life of civilization by subjecting the human mind to all sorts of new pressures and selfish exploitations. ... There has never been in the entire history of the United States an example of mismanagement and lack of vision so colossal and far-reaching in its consequences as our turning of the radio channels almost exclusively into

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<sup>675</sup> Wu, *The Master Switch*, 85.

<sup>676</sup> Starr, *The Creation*, 362-363.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

commercial hands. ... I believe we are dealing here with one of the most crucial issues that was ever presented to civilization at any time in its entire history.<sup>678</sup>

This apocalyptic vision may strike some as unduly alarmist, but in light of what we now know about media effects, it seems hardly unwarranted or inaccurate.<sup>679</sup>

A decade later, the same “father of radio” Lee de Forest wrote in an open letter to the National Association of Broadcasters: “What have you gentlemen done with my child? He was conceived as a potent instrumentality for culture, fine music, the uplifting of America’s mass intelligence. You have debased the child...”<sup>680</sup> De Forest’s complaint was widely shared. Major print publications from *Harpers*, *Time*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Fortune*, and *Business Week* were strident in their criticism of the commercialization of radio.<sup>681</sup>

In response to such criticism, the National Association of Broadcasters paid Paul Lazarsfeld (whose pathbreaking research convinced a generation of social scientists that the media had only “minimal effects”) to perform a study of public opinion on radio published in 1946. The study revealed that a large majority of the population either did not mind or actively favored radio advertising. While this pleased the study’s industry sponsors, Lazarsfeld acknowledged a significant caveat:

It must be admitted, however, that a direct inquiry into people’s dissatisfactions may not yield the most valid results. It is widely recognized in many fields of social

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<sup>678</sup> Quoted in McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 189, 199.

<sup>679</sup> The power of radio was soon thereafter to be demonstrated by its use at the hands of fascist governments in Europe and Japan. It also was shown to have a liberating potential, as Che Guevara described its use in the fight against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista:

At the moment when all the inhabitants of a region or a country burn with the fever of combatants, the power of the spoken word increases this fever and inserts itself in each of the combatants. It explains, teaches, incites, and separates friends from enemies. (Quoted in de Moraes, 2013, 110, translation mine)

<sup>680</sup> Quoted in Pickard, *America’s Battle*, 9.

<sup>681</sup> Pickard, *America’s Battle*, 14-15.

research that, psychologically speaking, supply creates demand. ... Within certain limits, it is a recognized fact that people like what they get. ... A survey like the present one cannot tell what people would like if they had the opportunity to listen to different radio fare.<sup>682</sup>

Much like the commercialization of newspapers, the commercialization of radio proceeded according to a market logic that was other than the aggregate of true consumer preferences – “preferences” in any but the most dogmatic economist’s sense.

By the 1950s, a powerful competitor to radio had emerged in the United States: television.<sup>683</sup> The US television market reached saturation in the mid ‘50s, and by the mid ‘60s television had exploded throughout the world.<sup>684</sup> In 1949, on the eve of television’s rise to dominance, a British journalist asked:

Thousands of people, and then people in millions, are going to become subject, to some degree, to their household screen. What will it mean to them? Good or ill?

With this new power there are likely to be no half-measures; it will choose its way, and then do what it cannot stop itself from doing.<sup>685</sup>

However, even in 1949, the future of television was not as open-ended as it might have seemed. Certainly in the United States, television’s future was powerfully determined by the already-powerful radio broadcast networks. They would apply the same basic business model to the new technology, providing predominantly light, inoffensive entertainment to attract the largest (and most well-heeled) audience to sell to advertisers.

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<sup>682</sup> Quoted in Pickard, *America’s Battle*, 28.

<sup>683</sup> C.P. Scott, former editor and owner of the *Guardian* newspaper, once said of television that nothing good could come of it: it is a word that is half Latin and half Greek. (Briggs & Burke, 2002, 184)

<sup>684</sup> Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 216-217.

<sup>685</sup> Quoted in Briggs and Burke, *A Social History*, 196.

As a consequence, television evolved into a medium much like radio, with critics raising some of the same concerns about television that critics of previous generations had of radio. In 1980, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published a report warning that the media and the economic pressures operating on it could lead to greater inequalities, hierarchies, and increased social control. The report's author wrote that given the centrality of the media to all social, economic, and political activity worldwide, "human history becomes more and more a race between communication and catastrophe. Full use of communication in all its varied forms is vital to assure that humanity has more than a history ... that our children are assured a future."<sup>686</sup>

### **iii. The fourth branch of government and the marketplace of ideas**

*"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves, therefore, are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree."*

- Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*

While Edmund Burke had referred to the media centuries ago as the "Fourth Estate" for its role as a counterweight to authoritarian government,<sup>687</sup> the conception of the media as the fourth *branch* of government is clearly tied to the United States' context, and, tracing back to 1959, is far more recent.<sup>688</sup> As in Burke's formulation, calling the media the fourth

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<sup>686</sup> Quoted in Robin Mansell and Kaarle Nordenstreng, "Great Media and Communication Debates: WSIS and the MacBride Report," *Information Technologies & International Development* 3, no. 4 (2006): 33.

<sup>687</sup> Pedrinho A. Guareschi, *O Direito Humano à Comunicação: Pela Democratização da Mídia* (Petrópolis RJ: Editora Vozes Limitada, 2013): 96.

<sup>688</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 53.



branch of government draws attention to its considerable power. Winning a political election is effectively impossible without the support of the media, or at least its attention. (Ask Jerry White, Virgil Goode, Rocky Anderson, Jill Stein, Gary Johnson, or James Harris; all six ran for U.S. president in the 2012 election, and all six received negligible if any media coverage, remaining effectively unknown to the U.S. population.) Conceptualizing the media as the fourth branch of government also calls attention to the fact that it is the only branch without a counterweight; it is not subject to any constitutional<sup>689</sup> system of checks and balances.<sup>690</sup> Instead of being subject to any democratic, political power, the media is subject only to private, economic power, of owners, advertisers, and markets; it would be the only branch of government without the democratic legitimacy conferred by the vote.<sup>691</sup> (Hence in Brazil, the term “*coronelismo informativo*,” or “information oligarchy,” is applied to the media.)

While the legislature is meant to write laws, the executive to apply them, and the judiciary to enforce and interpret them, the media is meant to maintain the public sphere where laws are first proposed and debated. In Habermas’ conception, “[p]ublic debate was supposed to transform *voluntas* [will] into a *ratio* [reason] that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary

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<sup>689</sup> Law professor Edwin Baker argued that U.S. jurisprudence has developed an implicit constitutional recognition of the press as the fourth branch of government, imposing a duty on other branches to aid the media by granting a right of access to their records, and granting the media the freedom to keep sources confidential, among other measures upholding the media’s *institutional* rights (Baker, 2007, 131-136). And for individuals, “the Supreme Court has expanded upon the right to receive information, emphasizing that acquiring information is necessary in order to have something to say.” (Braman, 2006, 89) But besides the ability of Congress and the Executive to regulate the media (only lightly) and classify information, there are no explicit constitutional checks on media power.

<sup>690</sup> Ignacio Ramonet, “Meios de Comunicação: um Poder a Serviço de Interesses Privados?” in *Mídia, Poder e Contrapoder: da Concentração Monopólica À Democratização da Informação*, ed. Dênis de Moraes, 53-70 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013): 66.

<sup>691</sup> Pascual Serrano, “Democracia e Liberdade de Imprensa,” in *Mídia, Poder e Contrapoder: da Concentração Monopólica À Democratização da Informação*, ed. Dênis de Moraes, 71-82 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013): 72-73.

in the interest of all.”<sup>692</sup> This is much the same rationale as can be found in First Amendment jurisprudence; as Judge Learned Hand wrote, maintaining an open and diverse public sphere “presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative process. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all.”<sup>693</sup>

To nurture the public sphere, the media must provide a marketplace of ideas. Although this popular catchphrase has developed a neoclassical economic gloss from some commentators – suggesting the prescription that media companies should be unregulated so as to provide a “free market” of ideas – its original conception was limited to purely democratic, not economic, values.<sup>694</sup> That is, the marketplace of ideas metaphor originally referred to a public sphere in which all ideas could be propounded, discussed, and debated – *not* an unregulated, *laissez faire* media market in which media companies could do as they pleased with no governmental oversight. The metaphor itself is commonly traced back to John Milton<sup>695</sup> and John Stuart Mill,<sup>696</sup> although neither explicitly used it.<sup>697</sup> Both authors would likely have been hostile to the interpretation of the “marketplace of ideas” as an

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<sup>692</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 83, emphasis removed.

<sup>693</sup> *United States v. Associated Press*, 53 F. Sup 362, 372 (S.D.N.Y. 1943).

<sup>694</sup> Philip M. Napoli, “The Marketplace of Ideas Metaphor in Communications Regulation,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>695</sup> “Clearly, Milton did not conceive of public discourse as a marketplace. Rather, he seems to have conceived it as a church; it is easy to imagine him chasing the money changers out of it.” (Nerone, 1995, 46)

<sup>696</sup> “While it is fair to say that Mill is fiercely individualistic, that *On Liberty* imagines a public realm of speakers and writers with more or less equal access to the means of communication, it is not fair to say that he has no sense for hindrances to free circulation of thought, whether social (the tyranny of opinion and norms of propriety), psychological (laziness and torpor), economic (advertising), or political (parliament, newspapers). Mill may underestimate concentrated economic power in the shaping of opinion, but his understandings of debate as warfare, the hazards of argument, the public sphere without guarantees, make him richer than his conscription into the marketplace of ideas.” (Peters, 2004, 71)

<sup>697</sup> John Durham Peters, “‘The Marketplace of Ideas’: A History of the Concept,” in *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Andrew Calabrese and Colin Sparks, 65-82 (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004): 66; Napoli, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” 153.

unregulated commercial media market; instead, their point was that the best hope for a self-governing society is to allow speakers of all political and ideological persuasions into the public sphere. This is the sort of marketplace of ideas the media should offer, whatever the economic or regulatory arrangements necessary to provide it. It must be independent of power structures in society, while linking the results of discussion in the public sphere with civil society and politics; and it must empower citizens to participate in and respond to public discourse in a manner free of all attempts at colonization or control.<sup>698</sup>

This conception of a marketplace of ideas may have accurately described a bygone era, in which anyone who wanted to start a competitive newspaper or magazine could do so with little difficulty – but this is not the case today.<sup>699</sup> For one, the economics of media prevent all but the wealthiest or well financed from entering the modern public sphere in any significant way and exercising free speech.<sup>700</sup> Second, technological developments have changed the playing field. As former FCC commissioner Clifford Durr observed, the “soundest idea uttered on a street corner, or even in a public auditorium, can’t hold its own against the most frivolous or vicious idea whispered into the microphone of a national network.”<sup>701</sup> Before the question of free speech comes the question of “who controls the master switch,”<sup>702</sup> as former CBS News president Fred Friendly put it – and the marketplace of ideas is not supposed to come with a master switch.

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<sup>698</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 420.

<sup>699</sup> Raymond Williams, "The Existing Alternatives in Communications," *Monthly Review* 65, no. 3 (2013): 94.

<sup>700</sup> Wu, *The Master Switch*, 122.

<sup>701</sup> Quoted in Pickard, *America's Battle*, 106.

<sup>702</sup> Wu, *The Master Switch*, 13.

Currently, the media in most of the world's countries is far from providing a marketplace of ideas that would live up to its requirements. Legal scholar Stanley Ingber summarizes his review of the concept and its real-world instantiation thus:

[T]he marketplace of ideas is as flawed as the economic market. Due to developed legal doctrine and the inevitable effects of socialization processes, mass communication technology, and unequal allocations of resources, ideas that support an entrenched power structure or ideology are most likely to gain acceptance within our current market. Conversely, those ideas that threaten such structures or ideologies are largely ignored in the marketplace.<sup>703</sup>

By excluding entire social groups and political perspectives from the mass media,<sup>704</sup> the current marketplace of ideas looks less like store-studded 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York, and more like Pyongyang. While those with conventional and popular views are unlikely to notice any distortions or barriers in the marketplace of ideas, dissidents and radicals who are shut out from the mass media are more perceptive.<sup>705</sup> Although many countries guarantee freedom of speech, Ingber points out that assuring an unpopular speaker that "he will incur no criminal penalty for his expression is of little value if he has no effective means of disseminating his views. A right that cannot be meaningfully exercised is, after all, no right at all."<sup>706</sup> While state censorship may be largely gone, limits on effective speech "are still present and still dangerous when the control is financial rather than political and administrative, when the bank and the chain shop have taken over from the Star Chamber

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<sup>703</sup> Stanley Ingber, "The Marketplace of Ideas: A Legitimizing Myth," *Duke Law Journal*, no. 1 (1984): 17.

<sup>704</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 14-15, 49.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>706</sup> Ingber, "The Marketplace," 47.

and the censor.”<sup>707</sup> Herbert Marcuse offers much the same indictment: “[d]ifferent opinions and ‘philosophies’ can no longer compete peacefully for adherence and persuasion on rational grounds: the ‘marketplace of ideas’ is organized and delimited by those who determine the national and the individual interest.”<sup>708</sup>

#### **iv. The media oligopoly**

A marketplace with only one seller, or only one landlord who owns all of the storefronts, is enough of a problem when the goods to be sold are mere consumer items. The problem is compounded in a marketplace of *ideas*, where the marketplace constitutes the public sphere. Hence consolidation in the realm of media has long been of grave concern. As early as 1945, the co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and legal counsel for the Newspaper Guild, Morris Ernst wrote:

The pipelines of thought to the minds of the nation are being contracted and squeezed. About thirty men realistically dominate the conduits of thought through the ether, the printing presses, and the silver screen. Without wide diversity of thought, freedom of speech and press become idle bits of a worn-out shibboleth. The cartelization of the mind of America is well on the way.<sup>709</sup>

Fears of precisely this sort, and the complementary fear on the part of some media owners that popular concern would attract federal regulation, led to the formation of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press in 1944. The Commission was to spend two years investigating the state of the media in the United States, researching and hearing testimony

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<sup>707</sup> Williams, “The Existing Alternatives,” 101.

<sup>708</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff et al., 1-12 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969): 9.

<sup>709</sup> Quoted in McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 78,

from journalists, media critics, advertisers, and newspaper readers.<sup>710</sup> The Commission's report, issued in 1947, identified media concentration as one of three factors threatening the freedom of the press.<sup>711</sup> Robert Hutchins, who was the final author of the report,<sup>712</sup> explained that the press had become a large-scale enterprise intertwined with finance and industry, and subject to bias emanating from its economic structure. Increased concentration in the news media served to reduce competition and diversity of opinion, while effectively silencing those who do not own a media company.<sup>713</sup> To address this problem, the Commission proposed that the press should become 'common carriers' for the diversity of political opinion, and should be subject to a new, independent agency to enforce an industry code of practice.<sup>714</sup>

This proposal was not implemented.<sup>715</sup> Although the Commission had been inspired and paid for by Henry Luce of *Time* magazine, its final report was distasteful to the owners of media companies. The media industry counterattacked with charges of – what else? – communism, and within a year of its publication, the Report faded from public discussion. Its impact was blunted, but not eliminated: it did help codify the social responsibility model of the press, which had an impact on the norms of journalistic professionalism.

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<sup>710</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 155-156.

<sup>711</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 2-3.

<sup>712</sup> Archibald MacLeish, a well-known poet and the author of the report's first draft, went further: he wanted the Commission to address the point in A.J. Leibling's famous quip about freedom of the press being guaranteed to all those who *own* one, and to recommend that all citizens be given some access rights to speak their mind through the mass media. (Pickard, 2015, 169-171)

<sup>713</sup> John D. H. Downing, "Media Ownership, Concentration, and Control: The Evolution of Debate," in *The Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko et al., 140-168 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 145.

<sup>714</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 65.

<sup>715</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 152-189.

What was neither blunted nor eliminated, however, was the trend toward media concentration. The trend may have been slowed somewhat by the FCC,<sup>716</sup> antitrust actions, and Supreme Court cases in mid-century, but toward the end of the twentieth century the ideological and regulatory climate was of the hands-off, let-the-market-work-its-magic sort.<sup>717</sup> Media mergers were thought to improve “efficiency,” and the “free market” was thought to unproblematically translate individual desires into optimal social outcomes. The problem with such an economic interpretation is that it confuses a *process* value for a *commodity* value.<sup>718</sup> Media mergers may very well reduce costs while providing much the same *commodities* to consumers; greater consolidation may or may not reduce viewpoint diversity, depending on a variety of other factors;<sup>719</sup> but this is beside the point. What is truly valued in the marketplace of ideas is the *process* by which some ideas gain more adherents than others: the process by which adherents of all sorts of ideas have the ability to present their ideas for discussion and debate. Having this process intact provides a democratic safeguard. Even if a highly concentrated media market *did* provide a great deal

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<sup>716</sup> Paul Lazarsfeld, seemingly the media companies’ go-to man for social science research favorable to the industry, testified in front of the FCC in favor of greater consolidation, arguing that his study of radio stations found few quantitative differences between newspaper-owned and independent stations. (Pickard, 2015, pp. 48-49)

<sup>717</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*; Pickard, *America’s Battle*.

<sup>718</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 13-16.

<sup>719</sup> Daniel E. Ho and Kevin M. Quinn, "Viewpoint Diversity and Media Consolidation: An Empirical Study," *Stanford Law Review* (2009). As Edwin Baker observes of studies attempting to measure viewpoint diversity, however:

[T]hese studies are curious in their implicit assumption that the merit of competition would lie primarily in financial commitment rather than diversity of content – that is, product differentiation.... These studies typically either compare newspapers in cities with competition to newspapers in otherwise comparable cities without competing dailies or compare a newspaper before and shortly after competition ended. An obvious problem is that these studies are prisoners of the investigator's need to find hard, quantitative measures of comparability; thus, they look at such things as the proportion of space allocated to different categories of news and find few differences. With such a methodology, a radical and a mainstream paper could appear identical.... [A]ny current empirical study that finds no correlation between competition and diversity either used inadequate tools to measure diversity, which is likely, or is viewing a world in which advertising has eliminated most diversity, which is even more likely. In this case the problem is not that competition lacks value but that the conditions of successful and valuable competition have already been, for now, destroyed. (Baker, 1992, 2133-2135)

of viewpoint diversity despite the inherent danger that fewer owners *could* restrict the number of viewpoints, an unconcentrated media market is superior for being intrinsically less vulnerable to this danger. (This is similar to the considerations underlying the “appearance of impropriety” standard for judicial ethics; here, the *potential* for impropriety is the evil to be avoided.)<sup>720</sup> Value considerations like these are easy to lose in the weeds of empirical data.<sup>721</sup> However, the relevant evidence strongly points to the negative effects of concentrated ownership.<sup>722</sup> For instance, an analysis of a large number of television stations, their owners, and the quality of their news programs found that as ownership size increased, news quality decreased.<sup>723</sup>

How concentrated, then, is the U.S. media? Surprisingly, answers vary widely. On one end is Ben Bagdikian, who finds that only five media conglomerates control most of the important media outlets;<sup>724</sup> on the other end is Benjamin Compaine, who finds that the media and information technology industries as a whole are quite unconcentrated compared to other sectors of the economy.<sup>725</sup> The overall level of concentration is probably

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<sup>720</sup> Nancy J. Moore, "Is the Appearance of Impropriety an Appropriate Standard for Disciplining Judges in the Twenty-First Century?" *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (2009): 300. Moore explains the purpose of the “appearance of impropriety” standard as arising from: “(1) the difficulty of proving violation of many specific rules, (2) the inability to predict in advance all of the specific conduct that should be prohibited, and (3) the extent to which the impropriety (or appearance of impropriety) is a function of nuanced facts that are impossible to either predict or articulate in the more specific provisions of a disciplinary code.” In the same way, undue owner influence on the media is difficult to prove, and the manners in which it may be exercised are difficult to predict or prohibit. As comedian Bill Maher joked in the context of a Walmart sex discrimination class action suit in which the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Walmart for lack of a “smoking gun”: “They said they didn’t find a smoking gun. What would that *be*? A note from Sam Walton himself, saying ‘check out the tits on Stacy in pet supplies, and make sure you don’t pay her like a man?’” (Maher, 2011, 44:28).

<sup>721</sup> Baker, C. Edwin. “Ownership of Newspapers: The View from Positivist Social Science,” (research paper R-12, Joan Shorenstein Center – Press, Politics, Public Policy, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, 1994).

<sup>722</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 25.

<sup>723</sup> Tom Rosenstiel and Amy Mitchell, "Does Ownership Matter in Local Television News: A Five-Year Study of Ownership and Quality," Project for Excellence in Journalism, Washington, DC (2003).

<sup>724</sup> Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

<sup>725</sup> Benjamin M. Compaine and Douglas Gomery, *Who Owns the Media? Competition and Concentration in the Mass Media Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2000).



somewhere in between,<sup>726</sup> but it depends on how one approaches the question. Also, the level of media concentration is affected by trends in the business world over time: the “big is beautiful” merger boom in the 1990s, and “deconvergence” in the 2000s.<sup>727</sup> (However, one study found that consolidation actually stayed level during the ‘90s and *increased* during the ‘00s.)<sup>728</sup>

According to one measure – the combined market share of a given media sector’s four biggest companies – the U.S. music (98%), television (84%), film (78%), and cable (61%) markets are highly concentrated, while the newspaper (48%) market seems unconcentrated. This, in a country 98% of whose cities have only one daily newspaper?<sup>729</sup> The apparent discrepancy here owes to the level of analysis: if concentration is measured nationwide, then the newspaper industry seems laudably unconcentrated; but if measured at the municipal level, the industry is terribly concentrated. Clearly, residents in the 98% of U.S. cities with only one daily newspaper care little that they have the option of choosing another daily paper *only if* they move to another city. Another point of confusion inheres in how an industry is defined: studies finding low levels of media industry concentration are those that combine all sorts of different media-related businesses (telephone companies, newspapers, computer hardware manufacturers, television networks, film studios, etc.) into “the media industry” for analysis.<sup>730</sup> Likewise, if instead of measuring concentration

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<sup>726</sup> Dwayne Winseck, “The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries,” in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 3-48 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011): 20.

<sup>727</sup> Dal Yong Jin, “Deconvergence and Deconsolidation in the Global Media Industries,” in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 167-182 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

<sup>728</sup> Tom Vizcarrondo, “Measuring Concentration of Media Ownership: 1976–2009,” *International Journal on Media Management* 15, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>729</sup> Winseck, “The State of Media,” 36.

<sup>730</sup> E.g., Compaine, *Who Owns the Media?*, Vizcarrondo, “Measuring Concentration.”

among car manufacturers, for instance, one combined car companies with bicycle, skateboard, and motorcycle manufacturers and train and bus companies into a “wheeled transport” industry, one would similarly expect to find very low levels of concentration in this synthetic industry – even if car manufacturing proper were highly concentrated.<sup>731</sup>

A more sensible approach to the question of media concentration involves breaking down the media into its constituent industries (radio, newspapers, and local, network, cable, and satellite television), and further breaking these down by locale. (After all, how does it affect the resident of one city that inaccessible news outlets thousands of kilometers away in another city are owned by a different company?) This was the approach taken by Eli Noam, whose impressive analysis found very high levels of concentration in local radio, TV, cable, satellite, newspaper, magazine, and national broadcast television and internet portal markets.<sup>732</sup>

In much of the rest of the world, the picture is the same. In Canada, cable, satellite, and conventional television along with newspaper markets are highly concentrated – even without breaking these categories down into local markets.<sup>733</sup> Furthermore, both historically and today, those who own the media in Canada also have significant holdings in virtually every economic sector.<sup>734</sup> To the south, in Mexico, the situation is even worse.<sup>735</sup> Measuring the combined market share of the top four firms in South American countries reveals that Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay have highly concentrated television

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<sup>731</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 60.

<sup>732</sup> Eli Noam, *Media Ownership and Concentration in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 62-74, 89, 143, 287, 378.

<sup>733</sup> Dwayne Winseck, “Financialization and the ‘Crisis of the Media’: The Rise and Fall of (some) Media Conglomerates in Canada,” in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 142-166 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011): 156.

<sup>734</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 152.

<sup>735</sup> *Ibid.*; Winseck, “The State of Media,” 37.

markets, and only Brazil's newspaper market is less-than-highly concentrated.<sup>736</sup> (In Latin America, unique in the developing world for its predominantly privately-owned media, such levels of concentration are even more troublesome.)<sup>737</sup> In Europe and Japan, newspaper and network television ownership are also highly concentrated.<sup>738</sup> Globally, the top ten media firms account for 80% of all media revenue.<sup>739</sup>

In addition to worrying levels of media ownership concentration, historically most of the media content traveling across borders goes in one direction: from the West to the rest.<sup>740</sup> Although there has been an increase in media products exported from the global South and East (Bollywood and Nollywood in film; Al Jazeera and RT in television news), U.S. film and TV exports increased fivefold between 1992 and 2004 – and this on top of already high levels.<sup>741</sup> While much has been made of globalization in recent years, the evidence for true globalization in media is sorely lacking; rather, the U.S. remains the dominant market for media as well as the predominant exporter.<sup>742</sup>

Media concentration is of obvious concern to the Left, as it threatens the values of equality and egalitarianism. It is also of concern to the Right: as Milton Friedman and his mentor Henry Simons argued, capitalism is superior to socialism primarily because it separates political from economic power.<sup>743</sup> But large, monopolistic firms vitiate this distinction between capitalism and socialism, producing the same concentration of political

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<sup>736</sup> Guillermo Mastrini and Martín Becerra, "Media Ownership, Oligarchies, and Globalization: Media Concentration in South America," in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 66-83 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011): 77-78.

<sup>737</sup> Enrique Gonzalez-Manet, *The Hidden War of Information* (New York: Ablex Publishing, 1988): 98.

<sup>738</sup> Noam, *Media Ownership*, 23.

<sup>739</sup> Winseck, "The State of Media," 37.

<sup>740</sup> Gonzalez-Manet, *The Hidden War*.

<sup>741</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 164-165.

<sup>742</sup> Colin Sparks, "What's Wrong with Globalization?" *Global Media and Communication* 3, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>743</sup> McChesney, *Blowing the Roof*, 229.

and economic power that conservatives have long feared. Nowhere is this concentration to be feared more than in the realm of the mass media, with its unparalleled influence over the political and cultural realms.<sup>744</sup> As Pedrinho Guareschi writes, “if a purely economic monopoly is already a social ill, then how much worse is a monopoly of values, beliefs, and symbols; the media cannot, for this reason, remain in the hands of only a few.”<sup>745</sup>

The tendency toward monopoly is detrimental in other ways besides. Larger media firms are able to exert greater market power to manage demand, limit competition, and increase entry costs for would-be entrants.<sup>746</sup> Horizontally-integrated media conglomerates – corporations with holdings in multiple industries including media – are more likely to chip away at the old firewalls between news and advertising, and are tempted (at the very least) to tailor their news coverage to further the interests of their other business holdings.<sup>747</sup> Even the benefits of mergers (synergies, cost savings) in other industries are detrimental in the media context. A media merger that allows the newly-formed company to reduce seemingly duplicative costs – primarily, journalists and their salaries – reduces the positive externalities the redundant journalists would have produced, like reports exposing malfeasance in government or business.<sup>748</sup> These criticisms apply both to media companies owned primarily by dispersed, institutional investors, and to those primarily owned by individuals or families. In the latter case, the

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<sup>744</sup> Andrew Calabrese and Colleen Mihal, “Liberal Fictions: The Public-Private Dichotomy in Media Policy,” in *The Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko et al., 226-263 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 229.

<sup>745</sup> Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 51, translation mine.

<sup>746</sup> Curran, *Media and Power*, 229.

<sup>747</sup> Robert B. Horwitz, “On Media Concentration and the Diversity Question,” *The Information Society* 21, no. 3 (2005): 185.

<sup>748</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 43-44.

examples of Rupert Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi vividly illustrate the additional dangers inherent in a concentrated media.<sup>749</sup>

## **v. Journalism's economic crisis**

Long before the internet threatened the business model of traditional journalism, the news media was cutting back on reporters, investigative resources, and foreign bureaus. Beginning in the 1970s and picking up steam in the '80s and '90s, television news in particular began to refocus from providing a public good and increasing the prestige of their parent company, to becoming as profitable as possible.<sup>750</sup> This involved not only firing journalists, but increasing ad time and reducing coverage of hard news. The cost-cutting process occurred while the news media was flush with cash, simply because media companies found it profitable in the short term.<sup>751</sup> The situation of today, with sites like newspaperdeathwatch.com chronicling the impending demise of print journalism, has been a long time in coming. While the number of employed journalists per capita has crashed since 2007, it had been in a long decline for the past two decades.<sup>752</sup>

In its attempt to attract the widest possible audience, the commercial news media has long devoted enormous amounts of space and time to soft news like sports, entertainment, and lifestyle content. This strategy is failing in the internet age, since soft news can be found for free elsewhere on web sites devoted exclusively to soft news

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<sup>749</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 100.

<sup>750</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 163-165. This process was the target of the darkly satirical 1976 film *Network*.

<sup>751</sup> Natalie Fenton, "Deregulation or Democracy? New Media, News, Neoliberalism and the Public Interest," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 01 (2011): 63-72; McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 123.

<sup>752</sup> McChesney, *Blowing the Roof*, 160.

topics.<sup>753</sup> Newspaper circulation per capita has fallen by 50% over the half century, and since 1980 the viewership of the nightly network news has nearly halved.<sup>754</sup> The number of journalists per capita in the U.S. has dropped by half since 1970, and the absolute number of staffers working in television news has halved since 1980.<sup>755</sup> From 2006 to 2013, total revenue supporting journalism in the U.S. fell by a third.<sup>756</sup> The revenue declines for newspapers have been even starker: from their peak in 2005, *half* of advertising revenue had evaporated by 2012, and 17,000 newspaper jobs were lost.<sup>757</sup> Free online classified advertising and targeted advertising offered by internet portals have been major contributors to the massive drop in newspaper ad revenue, forcing many papers to become online-only and others into bankruptcy.<sup>758</sup> Overly optimistic mergers and acquisitions activity has piled debt on many newspapers, further worsening their financial position.<sup>759</sup> Internet advertising, far from making up for lost print ad revenue, still amounts to no more than 2% of all news ad revenue in the U.S.<sup>760</sup> Desperate to recoup these revenue losses, newspapers are resorting to so-called “native advertising,” selling at a premium advertisements made to look indistinguishable from actual news content.<sup>761</sup> But overall,

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<sup>753</sup> Robert G. Picard, “The Future of the News Industry,” in *Media and Society*, ed. James Curran, 365-379 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010): 372.

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>755</sup> Charles Lewis, *935 Lies: The Future of Truth and the Decline of America's Moral Integrity* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014): 168.

<sup>756</sup> Jesse Holcomb, “News Revenue Declines Despite Growth from New Sources,” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project (April 3, 2014).

<sup>757</sup> Jesse Holcomb and Amy Mitchell, “The Revenue Picture for American Journalism,” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project (March 26, 2014).

<sup>758</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 72.

<sup>759</sup> Picard, “The Future of the News,” 376.

<sup>760</sup> Janine Jackson, “A Better Future for Journalism Requires a Clear-Eyed View of Its Present,” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 202-208 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 204; Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media 2014: Overview” (March 2014).

<sup>761</sup> Native advertising is not an innovation; rather, it is the rebirth of what were called “reading notices” in newspapers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, before they were effectively outlawed. (Baker, 1992, 2144-2146)

the trend is toward less advertising revenue for journalism, as major advertisers cut expenditures and refocus on direct marketing, sponsorships, and other less traditional forms.<sup>762</sup>

However, worldwide the story is different. In most OECD countries, newspaper markets have grown between 2004 and 2008, and in Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and South Africa, newspaper circulation surged by 35 percent from 2000 to 2008. Worldwide newspaper industry revenues actually grew by a very modest 4.6% from 1998 to 2010.<sup>763</sup> Even in the United States during the Great Recession, publicly-traded newspaper companies' profits rarely dipped below the historical average profit for a Fortune 500 company, thanks to cuts in jobs for journalists.<sup>764</sup> The problem for newspapers in the U.S. is not that readership has declined: it is that many readers have switched from print to online editions, which generate only a fraction of the advertising revenue of print.<sup>765</sup>

The crisis in journalism's bottom line is translating into a crisis in the quality of journalism. With fewer journalists to manage an increasing workload cranked up by the 24-hour news cycle, professional routines have been adversely affected.<sup>766</sup> Journalists tend to be more desk-bound, dependent on sources, formulaic, and reliant on public relations material.<sup>767</sup> A study of British newspapers found that nearly half of stories were wholly or mainly replications of copy produced by wire services, copy which itself was heavily

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<sup>762</sup> Picard, "The Future of the News," 370.

<sup>763</sup> Winseck, "The Political Economies," 41-42.

<sup>764</sup> Marc Edge, "Not Dead Yet: Newspaper Company Annual Reports Show Chains Still Profitable," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago, Illinois, August 9-12, 2012.

<sup>765</sup> Baker, "Testimony Before the Subcommittee."

<sup>766</sup> See, e.g., Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, eds., *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It* (New York: The New Press, 2011).

<sup>767</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 130.

influenced by PR material about half of the time.<sup>768</sup> Compared to television news coverage in the 1970s, today's news spends less time covering Congress and more time covering celebrities.<sup>769</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the shift from a news media with a public service mission to a more profit-driven media correlates closely with the steep decline in public trust in the press. In 1973, 85% of those surveyed in the U.S. had either "a great deal" or "only some" confidence in the press; by 2008, 45% said they had "hardly any" confidence.<sup>770</sup> A recent survey of journalists themselves found that the vast majority believe that the greatest problem facing the press is reduced quality due to commercial pressures.<sup>771</sup> Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock explains that the "clash is between an anticipated, responsible 'civic trustee' role of the media, as political agency, versus the harshly economic role of the media as the 'pimp' of viewers."<sup>772</sup> As the news media becomes ever more a mere pimp selling its audience to advertisers, trust and use of the news media will likely continue to decline. Already, the use of newspapers, news magazines, and television news in the U.S. is at a 50-year low.<sup>773</sup>

Given such a dire situation, many have understandably placed their hope in the internet: that somehow, the internet will save and reinvigorate journalism. The available evidence suggests such hope to be ill founded.<sup>774</sup> Current studies of online journalism find

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<sup>768</sup> Justin M.W. Lewis et al., "The Quality and Independence of British Journalism," Project Report, *MediaWise* (2008): 15, 26.

<sup>769</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 176-185.

<sup>770</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 88-89.

<sup>771</sup> Joan Pedro, "The Propaganda Model in the Early 21st Century (Parts I & II)," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1876.

<sup>772</sup> Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock, "The Political Economy of Political Ignorance," in *The Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko et al., 458-481 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 469.

<sup>773</sup> Lewis, *935 Lies*, 166.

<sup>774</sup> More stridently, John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney write:

For the past decade, the great question has been: Will the Internet provide the market basis for resources sufficient to spawn a viable independent mass journalism? The answer is now in: It won't. Not even close. The corporate news media sector will provide its version of greatly scaled-back news online, but by no account will this come close to filling the breach, and that



it to largely replicate the content and practices of print journalism (as well as its concentrated ownership structure).<sup>775</sup> The majority of the most-viewed internet sites are associated with traditional news companies, and are owned by the top twenty largest media conglomerates.<sup>776</sup> Two of the most popular internet news sites, Google and Yahoo, merely reproduce material from the Associated Press and Reuters 85% of the time.<sup>777</sup> Advertising revenue for journalism on the internet looks similarly unpromising, with the lions' share of revenue going to ad networks and data handlers.<sup>778</sup>

This crisis of journalism is a crisis of democracy itself, as Robert McChesney makes clear with the following thought experiment:

Imagine if the federal government had issued an edict demanding that there be a sharp reduction in international journalism, or that local newsrooms be closed or their staffs and budgets slashed. Imagine if the president had issued an order that news media concentrate upon celebrities and trivia, rather than rigorously investigate and pursue lawbreaking in the White House, or critically evaluate the case the White House was making for invading another nation. Had that occurred, there would have been an outcry that would have made Watergate look like a day at the beach. Newsrooms would have exploded with rebellion. ... Yet when quasi-monopolistic commercial interests effectively do pretty much the same thing, with a wink and a nod from the politicians in power, and leave our society as impoverished

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does not even broach the issue of the quality of this corporate journalism. If there are going to be independent, competing newsrooms covering the world in the coming years, it will require a major change from the current course. (Foster and McChesney, 2011, 19)

<sup>775</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 39-41.

<sup>776</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 112.

<sup>777</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 131.

<sup>778</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

culturally as if it had been the result of a government fiat, it passes with barely minor protest in most newsrooms and in journalism and communication programs.<sup>779</sup>

A democracy deprived of a functioning news media cannot survive for long. Serious structural changes to the news media are needed, and will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **vi. Analyzing the political economy of media – the neoclassical way**

For a number of reasons, using the tools provided by economics to analyze the news media can be a bit like hammering nails with a rock: it can be done, but it is hard to do it well. One reason is that the news media provides a product very different from most goods and services. As one commenter put it, “there are certain kinds of business in which the public interest is more of a factor than it is in the manufacture of neckties.”<sup>780</sup> The news is more than a mere product: it is the means by which citizens in a democracy fulfill their duties as responsible self-governors. Without knowledge of politics (and economics, developments in society, etc.), democratic citizens cannot make informed decisions. As James Madison put it, a democratic society starved of information is a prelude to either a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both. This drives a pretty wide wedge between the knowledge and information produced by the news media on the one hand, and neckties, frozen foods, perfume, or most any other product produced by industries in other sectors of the economy.

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<sup>779</sup> McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 121.

<sup>780</sup> Pauline Kael, quoted in Wu, *The Master Switch*, 97.

While it would be irrational for an individual to choose to forgo food or clothing, it may be perfectly rational in a strictly economic sense for an individual to choose not to “consume” information about politics.<sup>781</sup> After all, what chance does one person have to influence a government, even if that person has used the news media to become perfectly informed? At the same time, however, if *everyone* (or even a significant portion of the population) remains ignorant, the entire society pays an enormous cost: in economic terms, the “externality” of being governed either by ignoramuses or those who have tricked ignoramuses into voting for them.

The news media can produce significant *positive* externalities as well.<sup>782</sup> If only a few people pay for journalism that exposes corruption or malfeasance – yet word of this exposé spreads even to people who did not pay for it, resulting in a corrupt or incompetent official being ousted from office – then the entire society benefits. Whether democratic citizens on the whole are lamentably ignorant or laudably well-informed, the costs in terms of bad or good government are shared by all, regardless of how many people actually paid for information from the media. The market, therefore, does not do what it is supposed to in this instance: apportion costs to those who receive a benefit, and benefits to those who incurred a cost.

Why this is so can be answered fairly well by standard neoclassical economics. The news media produces a product with a marginal cost of zero, information, that is “nonrivalrous” (my consumption does not affect yours – I can read as many newspaper articles as I want, yet the number available to you remains the same) and “nonexcludable”

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<sup>781</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 30-31.

<sup>782</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 29-30.

(it is very difficult to exclude those who do not pay for news from receiving it – as media companies have learned well through painful experience with the internet).<sup>783</sup> As such, what the news media produces are “public goods,” like military defense or public safety, which are traditionally viewed within neoclassical economics as best provided not by the market, but by government.<sup>784</sup>

Hence, it is little wonder that the attempt to provide the public good of an informed citizenry through market mechanisms results in market failure. (Imagine trying to provide national defense through the private market.) Instead of the interplay between supply and demand producing the optimal level of output and price for political information, the market fails to supply those willing to pay the *marginal* cost of news (which is next to nothing) but not the market price, and fails to reward producers of news for the total social benefit they provide.<sup>785</sup> Since the social benefit the news media provides is enormous – it makes the difference between a well-run, functioning democracy and a pseudo-democracy run for the sole benefit of those most successful at gaming the system – a market failure in this sphere can produce a failed society. For these economic reasons journalism has always been subsidized, whether by advertising, direct government subsidies, or indirect subsidies like below-cost postal rates.<sup>786</sup> Another very indirect government subsidy is intellectual property law: by enforcing copyrights and trademarks, the government allows media companies a legal monopoly on their brands and products, granting them monopoly-level profits.<sup>787</sup>

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<sup>783</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 213-214.

<sup>784</sup> N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics, Seventh Edition* (Mason OH: Cengage Learning, 2014): 215-217.

<sup>785</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 28-29.

<sup>786</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 214.

<sup>787</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 31-32.

Lastly, media products are unusual in that they are produced by highly networked companies.<sup>788</sup> The standard neoclassical model of competition assumes a fragmented market of competing suppliers, distributors, and retailers; yet real-world media companies do not typically bid for reports produced by thousands of independent, competing journalists. Instead, the news media comprises vertically-integrated firms within which there is very little competition; production, reproduction, and distribution are typically done in-house, instead of through competitive markets for each component, delivery, and sale of the final product.

Even given these difficulties, neoclassical economists have made some progress in analyzing the political economy of media. The preferred methodology of neoclassical economics is to create a mathematical model of the phenomenon in question – often very complex and ingeniously devised – and to draw conclusions on the basis of the model. (Here, the devil is less in the *details* of the models, and more in drawing real-world conclusions from them.)<sup>789</sup> Neoclassical economics can be useful in drawing out various economic forces and pressures operating in different kinds of markets, and suggesting ways to make them run more efficiently or produce more positive social outcomes. One such analysis modeled the effects of political “capture” of the media: when governments are able to exert undue influence on what the news media disseminates.<sup>790</sup> The study found that having a large number of independent media companies may make it more difficult for a government to control the news. It also found that government capture of the media is likely to lead to corruption and malfeasance, and leave voters unable to

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<sup>788</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 60-62.

<sup>789</sup> See, e.g., Tony Lawson, *Economics and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>790</sup> Timothy Besley and Andrea Prat, "Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? The Role of the Media in Political Accountability," *American Economic Review* 96, no. 3 (2006).

identify and remove corrupt or incompetent officials. Lastly, the study's authors looked at a large sample of real-world countries and their media systems, and found a correlation between corruption and both high concentration of newspaper ownership and high state ownership of newspapers.

In a similar vein, other economists modeled the effects of independent media sources on elections.<sup>791</sup> Their model suggested that having a maximum number of independent media outlets increases the likelihood that electoral competition will result in more balanced, less polarized, centrist policies. This result obtained even when the different media outlets were biased in favor of different political persuasions; however, this result was premised on the (psychologically dubious) assumption that voters interpret biased media "strategically," effectively de-biasing media reports as they are received. Another study modeled the incentives of the media to provide news of relevance to different groups in society.<sup>792</sup> The model suggested that economic pressures will induce the mass media to provide less news of relevance to small groups and the poor, and more news to large groups and segments of the population that are more valuable to advertisers (the young and the rich). This directly translates into political policies biased toward the young and the wealthy, as other groups will be less likely to hear about policy proposals benefitting them since such policies and the politicians proposing them would get less coverage in the media – and as a direct result, politicians planning to benefit the poor or minority groups are likely to receive less support at the ballot box.

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<sup>791</sup> Jimmy Chan and Wing Suen, "Media as Watchdogs: The Role of News Media in Electoral Competition," *European Economic Review* 53, no. 7 (2009).

<sup>792</sup> David Strömberg, "Mass Media Competition, Political Competition, and Public Policy," *The Review of Economic Studies* 71, no. 1 (2004).

Some of the most important such studies investigate the effects of concentrated media ownership and wealth inequality on democracies. In one, a model of voting decisions, inequality, and media ownership suggested that societies with more unequal distributions of wealth and more concentrated media ownership run a greater risk of the news media being captured by wealthy interests.<sup>793</sup> It suggested that concentrated wealth in itself is likely to lead to concentrated media ownership, as those with disproportionate wealth will have interests that diverge sharply from the rest of the population, and are willing to pay a high price for control of the media since they have more to gain by manipulating the electorate. This capture of the media by those at the top of a highly unequal society is likely to lead to serious efficiency losses, as a misled electorate chooses inefficient policies that disproportionately benefit only a small fraction of society. Using a different model, a related study came to much the same conclusions: the greater the level of inequality in a country, the higher the likelihood that the rich will spend money on influencing the media to support policies in their own interests at the expense of the non-wealthy.<sup>794</sup> Then, looking at real-world examples and a large, diverse sample of countries, the study found that income inequality is associated with lower levels of media freedom, particularly in democracies. The extent of media freedom, in turn, was found to have a positive effect on the level of public spending on education and health – policies that benefit the whole of society (possibly at greater cost to the wealthy). In other words, societies that are more polarized between rich and poor are at greater risk of having their

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<sup>793</sup> Giacomo Corneo, "Media Capture in a Democracy: The Role of Wealth Concentration," *Journal of Public Economics* 90, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>794</sup> Maria Petrova, "Inequality and Media Capture," *Journal of Public Economics* 92, no. 1 (2008).

media captured by wealthy interests who will use it to convince the rest of the population to vote against their own interests.

Tom Ferguson goes further, arguing that “the public’s prospects in a free market for information peopled only by profit-maximizing producers and totally self-interested consumers are even bleaker than indicated by existing discussions of ‘imperfect markets’ for information. In strict, neoclassical logic, for political information [useful to the non-wealthy], a market is unlikely to exist at all.”<sup>795</sup> He provides a comparison between a media outlet providing accurate predictions of the stock market with one providing information about the political activities of businesses and their relationships with government officials.<sup>796</sup> The former outlet will have an eager, willing audience of investors turning its information directly into profits. The latter outlet (for instance, a magazine) may initially attract an audience, but one which will “then face massive collective-action problems plus, commonly, direct repression and formidable transaction costs. While the social value of the information may be enormous, there is, from a purely self-interested individual economic standpoint, no reason to purchase the magazine at all. All one gets is a headache, accompanied perhaps by long-term demoralization.”<sup>797</sup>

Overall, neoclassical economic studies of the political economy of media have contributed to our understanding of how political and economic pressures affect the media, and how the media in turn affects political and economic outcomes. They suggest that media scrutiny increases political accountability and improves policy outcomes; that media

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<sup>795</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 402.

<sup>796</sup> This is precisely what the news media *should* focus on. As Gore Vidal “[p]ut bluntly, who collects what money from whom in order to spend on what is all there is to politics, and in a serious country should be the central preoccupation of the media.” (Vidal, 2002, 226)

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*, 402-403, references removed.



pluralism reduces the risk of a captured media, while concentrated ownership increases it; that the media affects both how well-informed voters are and the outcomes of voting; that the standard economic analysis of competition and anti-trust policy is ill-suited for use in the media context; and that the news is a public good, for which voters would rationally choose to tax themselves in order to reduce the cost of gathering political information and to increase the positive externality of an informed citizenry.<sup>798</sup>

### **vii. Media bias**

*"You cannot hope to bribe or twist  
(thank God!) the British journalist.  
But, seeing what the man will do  
unbribed, there's no occasion to."*

- Humbert Wolfe, "Epigram"

While neoclassical studies are useful to arrive at a fuller understanding of the political economy of media, they need to be supplemented by analyses using a broader methodological toolkit. As one scientist put it, there are some truths that cannot be reached from the comfort of one's armchair;<sup>799</sup> empirical investigations using a variety of techniques are also required. To begin, there are a great variety of studies investigating the

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<sup>798</sup> Andrea Prat and David Strömberg, "The Political Economy of Mass Media," in *Advances in Economics and Econometrics: Volume 2, Applied Economics: Tenth World Congress*, vol. 50, ed. Daron Acemoglu et al., 135-187 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>799</sup> Francisco Gil-White, "Let the Meme be (a Meme)," in *Culture, Nature, Memes*, ed. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, 158-190 (New York: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 174.

controversial topic of media bias: is the U.S. media biased in favor of the Right or the Left, or is the issue of bias more complicated than this simple binary choice? And if the media does provide a biased supply of information and political analysis, what is the cause?

The results of a five-country survey of journalists working in the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Italy, and Germany found that journalists place themselves on average a bit to the left of center on their respective national political spectrums.<sup>800</sup> Only in Italy did a significant minority place themselves significantly to the left of center; in all five countries, a substantial majority placed themselves at or near the midpoint of the political scale. When asked to place the news organization for which they worked on a political scale, however, journalists in a majority of countries placed them slightly to the *right* of center; in Italy, the average was slightly to the left, and in the U.S., the average was almost exactly in the center. The U.S. was also an outlier in the correlation between journalists' political beliefs and those of the news organizations they worked for: in the U.S., there was no correlation, while in Britain, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, left-of-center journalists tend to work for left-of-center news organizations, and right-of-center journalists tend to work for right-of-center outlets.

The same study involved an experiment as well. The journalist participants were given a hypothetical scenario and asked to choose how to frame it for a newspaper article. The choices they were given reflected different political biases, so that they could frame the story with leftwing or rightwing bias, or a neutral tone. The result was that in all of the countries studied, journalists' political preferences "tend to shade the news rather than

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<sup>800</sup> Thomas E. Patterson and Wolfgang Donsbach, "News Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors," *Political Communication* 13, no. 4 (1996).

coloring it deeply.”<sup>801</sup> (This dovetails with a similar, earlier experimental study of elite U.S. journalists, which found that when they “confront new information, they usually manage to process it without interjecting their own viewpoints.... When this does occur, the net result is to push their perceptions of the news somewhat in the liberal direction.”)<sup>802</sup> The U.S. and British news systems displayed the least partisan bias. In all five countries, journalists tended to be only slightly left of center (and several surveys of journalists in the U.S. have found that the vast majority tend to vote for Democratic rather than Republican candidates),<sup>803</sup> and this exerted only a minimal effect on their reporting.

At least in the U.S., however, many of those who watch or read the news *perceive* a political bias: a quarter of one survey’s “very liberal” respondents, and nearly one half of “very conservative” respondents perceived a great deal of political bias in television news.<sup>804</sup> (Younger people and women were the least likely to perceive any political bias, for reasons to be discussed later.) Scores of books have been written to feed both perceptions, arguing that the U.S. media are strongly biased in either a leftwing or rightwing direction – although those arguing a leftwing bias tend to focus on coverage of social issues, while those arguing a rightwing bias tend to focus on coverage of foreign policy issues.<sup>805</sup> Playing a referee, Michael Schudson judges that “[r]ight-critics cannot point to media *structures* as biased against their views; the left-critics win hands down on this point. But the right-critics argue that reporters and editors at leading national news institutions have a

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<sup>801</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>802</sup> S. Robert Lichter et al., *The Media Elite* (Bethesda MA: Adler & Adler, 1986): 63-71.

<sup>803</sup> See, e.g., Jim A. Kuypers, *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2002): 205; Tim Groseclose, *Left Turn: How Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 2011): 100.

<sup>804</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 72-73.

<sup>805</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 79-81.

predominantly liberal outlook. ... If corporate organization tilts unmistakably rightward, patterns of occupational recruitment veer just as sharply the other way.”<sup>806</sup>

However, this applies only to the “Washington and New York-based news elite,” and only to their views on social issues; on economics, they are centrist (from a U.S. perspective) or center-right (from a European perspective).<sup>807</sup> A more recent survey revealed Washington-based journalists to be significantly more conservative on economic issues (including healthcare) than the general population.<sup>808</sup> A snapshot of this news elite from 1980 found that its members

grew up at a distance from the social and cultural traditions of small-town middle America. Instead, they came from big cities in the northeast and north central states. Their parents were mostly well off, highly educated members of the upper middle class, especially the educated professions. In short, they are a highly cosmopolitan group, with differentially eastern, urban, ethnic, upper-status, and secular roots.<sup>809</sup>

This is not a social milieu from which a wide variety of economic perspectives would be expected. Those journalists with leftwing economic and political views are conspicuous by their rarity, and have to work hard to hide their opinions from editors, fellow journalists, and readers.<sup>810</sup>

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<sup>806</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 6.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid., 7; S. Lichter et al., *The Media Elite*, 13-19, 29-31, 41-42.

<sup>808</sup> David Croteau, “Challenging the ‘Liberal Media’ Claim,” *Extra!*, 11, no. 4 (1998); David Croteau, “Examining the ‘Liberal Media’ Claim: Journalists’ Views on Politics, Economic and Social Policy (Including Health Care), and Media Coverage,” *International Journal of Health Services* 29, no. 3 (1999). This bias extends to journalists’ use of sources, with 31% saying they would “nearly always” turn to business representatives as sources for economic stories, but only 5% would turn to labor representatives.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid., 22-23. “Ethnic” was a strange choice of word for a group found to be 95% White; perhaps it was chosen to refer to the disproportionate number of Jewish journalists in the elite media.

<sup>810</sup> A. Kent MacDonald, “Boring from within the Bourgeois Press: Part One,” *Monthly Review* 40, no. 6 (1988); A. Kent MacDonald, “Boring from within the Bourgeois Press: Part Two,” *Monthly Review* 40, no. 7 (1988). “A good case can be made that nonsectarian, nondoctrinaire radical journalists are more objective than bourgeois journalists (who typically aren’t even conscious that capitalist values color their news judgment) because they stand outside the system, examining it from an independent, skeptical

Both leftwing and rightwing social scientists not only perceive political bias in the U.S. media, but have measured it as well. Leftwing researchers Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky found a pronounced rightwing bias in foreign policy coverage using four detailed case studies.<sup>811</sup> In an examination using six case studies of media coverage of racial and sexual issues, rightwing researcher Jim Kuypers found a clear bias reflecting “liberal, upper-middle class, white baby-boomer activist politics.”<sup>812</sup> He concluded that the U.S. media creates an environment in which those to the right of center, along with those to the left of a narrow band of mainstream liberal politics, will feel ignored, ostracized, or demonized – a conclusion Herman and Chomsky may likely agree with.

Another social scientist, Tim Groseclose, used an original method to measure media bias: first, members of the U.S. Congress were given a numerical score corresponding to their voting record on proposed laws, receiving points for every bill approved by a leading liberal interest group. (A higher score indicated a position on the Left; a lower score indicated a position on the Right.) Then, all of the transcribed speeches of these Congress members over a period of time were analyzed to measure the number of references to rightwing and leftwing think tanks; and then media outlets were measured for their references to the same think tanks over the same time period. By comparing media outlets’

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perspective. Radical journalists are more inclined to report what governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions are actually doing, rather than just what they say they are doing. They are less likely to adopt the mindset of official sources or to be lulled by self-serving government propaganda and disinformation. They are more likely to include the experiences and views of the powerless, the mistreated, and the dissenting. Radicals' long memories make it less likely that they will give in to the artificial sense of urgency that makes so much news superficial. Aware of the interrelatedness of social, economic, and political issues, they aren't satisfied with reporting random bits of information. Besides exposing rotten apples in the capitalist barrel, they call the shape of the barrel itself into question. And instead of palliatives, they suggest fundamental cures for societal ills.” (MacDonald, 1988b, 22)

<sup>811</sup> Edward S. Herman, and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

<sup>812</sup> Kuypers, *Press Bias*, 244.

references to those of Congress members, media outlets were given a numerical score of political bias corresponding to the measure tracking the ideological pattern of Congress members' voting records. Using this measure, the majority of media outlets in the U.S. were found to have a left-of-center bias.<sup>813</sup> However, this measure only tracks rightwing or leftwing bias within the limited spectrum of political ideology in the U.S. Congress, which is significantly narrower than the global spectrum of political ideology.<sup>814</sup>

What this means is not entirely clear: citing leftwing think tanks more frequently than rightwing think tanks certainly suggests a leftwing bias, but without detailed investigations into actual instances of reporting, it is hard to tell exactly how such a bias is manifested, or even whether something other than political bias is at work. The example Groseclose uses for bias in media coverage of social issues (partial birth abortion)<sup>815</sup> is apposite and telling, but his example of bias in media coverage of economic issues (George W. Bush's tax cuts)<sup>816</sup> is an awkward match for his thesis.<sup>817</sup> Nonetheless, the accumulated evidence strongly suggests a left-of-center media bias for social issues.

Those who argue that the U.S. media is primarily biased towards the Right tend to argue that the left-of-center opinions of journalists themselves carry less weight than the

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<sup>813</sup> Groseclose, *Left Turn*, 152-156.

<sup>814</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-168.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-191.

<sup>817</sup> The Bush tax cuts gave an extra \$47,114 to a family making \$1 million, and an extra \$410 to a family making \$20,000. Democrats tended to explain their opposition to these cuts by pointing out that the fact that the rich disproportionately benefitted from them, while Republicans countered with the fact that after the cuts, the rich would end up paying a larger overall *share* of total taxes than the poor (an extra one tenth of one percent). While both facts are true, no one would seriously argue that the *intention* behind the tax cut was simply to benefit the poor or to make the tax system more progressive – *that* goal could have been achieved by cutting taxes for the poor exclusively. The actual intention behind the cuts was linked to beliefs that lower taxes increase economic growth in general, that the rich would use their tax cut to create jobs, and that everyone deserves to keep as much of their earnings as possible. That the media focused on the disproportionate-benefit fact instead of the overall-share-of-taxes fact reveals less about partisan bias, and more about reporters' desire to avoid partisan spin.

right-of-center opinions of the *owners* of media companies. In this view, claiming that liberal journalists bias the content of the news is like claiming that the preferences of cooks at McDonald's affect the menu.<sup>818</sup> This was in fact the dominant view during the 1930s and '40s, and rightwing bias in the media was particularly pronounced as the Red Scare began in the late '40s.<sup>819</sup> A 1936 survey of journalists found a majority subject to direct ideological control from editors or owners; but surveys in 1960 and 1980 found a drastic reduction in such control.<sup>820</sup> More recent surveys have revealed that media owners have reasserted ideological control. In a survey of U.S. journalists in 2000, 41 percent of journalists said that they had avoided reporting stories or had softened them to benefit the owners of their media company.<sup>821</sup> In a 1996 survey of Canadian journalists, over half said that direct pressure from media owners often or occasionally filter the news; 45 percent said that they often or occasionally engage in self-censorship to avoid reprisal by owners.<sup>822</sup>

One very rough indication of contemporary rightwing bias is the amount of media coverage devoted to issues most voters consider Republicans to handle better (crime and national security) versus those considered to be handled better by Democrats (civil rights, labor, and social welfare). In an analysis of over 15,000 nightly news stories, Republican-owned issues appeared at a rate of 5 to 1 compared to Democrat-owned issues.<sup>823</sup> A rightwing bias appears particularly pronounced in the realm of foreign policy, where even

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<sup>818</sup> Uscinski, *The People's News*, 31.

<sup>819</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 19, 126.

<sup>820</sup> Lichter et al., *The Media Elite*, 43-44.

<sup>821</sup> Columbia Journalism Review and The Pew Research Center, "Self Censorship: How Often and Why," *The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press*, March 30, 2000.

<sup>822</sup> Robert A. Hackett and Richard S. Gruneau, *The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000): 80.

<sup>823</sup> Joseph E. Uscinski, *The People's News: Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014): 95-97.

leftwing media outlets demonstrate bias in favor of military interventions.<sup>824</sup> And as foreign policy is a distant realm about which most citizens have no direct experience, the media exerts a stronger influence here than over other issues.<sup>825</sup> The combination of rightwing bias and powerful media effects means that media coverage of foreign policy tends to push the population into supporting military intervention.<sup>826</sup> (And by omission – by *not* covering a military or covert intervention abroad, as occurs when political elites are in agreement on the policy – the media leaves the public in the dark, giving such intervention *de facto* support.)<sup>827</sup>

Bias in coverage of economic policy is subtler and more mixed according to one study, with newspapers displaying partisan bias in the direction of their editors' (or owners') ideology for some issues, and bias in the direction of their readership's ideology for other issues.<sup>828</sup> However, here as in foreign policy, it is safe to agree with Ralph Miliband that the media provides far more "to confirm conservative-minded viewers in *their* attitudes than is the case for 'radical' ones; as far as the latter are concerned, television, in any serious meaning of the word 'radical,' is a permanent exercise in

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<sup>824</sup> David Edwards and David Cromwell, *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media* (London: Pluto Books, 2006); Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

<sup>825</sup> Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin L. DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects," *Communication Research* 3, no. 1 (1976); Wayne Wanta et al., "Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2004); Cui Zhang and Charles William Meadows III, "International Coverage, Foreign Policy, and National Image: Exploring the Complexities of Media Coverage, Public Opinion, and Presidential Agenda," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012).

<sup>826</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008).

<sup>827</sup> Philip J. Powlick and Andrew Z. Katz, "Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. Supplement 1 (1998). When the media does not cover certain foreign conflicts, citizens do not accumulate knowledge about them (Beattie, 2016d). Without knowledge, public opinion cannot exert any influence on government foreign policy regarding such conflicts.

<sup>828</sup> Valentino Larcinese et al., "Partisan Bias in Economic News: Evidence on the Agenda-Setting Behavior of US Newspapers," *Journal of Public Economics* 95, no. 9 (2011).



dissuasion.”<sup>829</sup> Michael Shudson agrees, writing that the “American media do not have a wide-screen view of the range of possible political positions. Compared to the press in most liberal democracies, they foreshorten the representation of views on the left...”<sup>830</sup> The spectrum of political bias in the media is in a fairly narrow center-right range for economic issues and right-of-center range for foreign policy issues, and excludes advocacy or even discussion of views considered “radical” on either the Left (significant wealth redistribution, pacifism) or the Right (pure *laissez faire*, isolationism).

Also, media bias has arguably shifted over time within the United States. During the first half of the twentieth century, the influence of conservative media owners dominated over that of liberal and socialist journalists.<sup>831</sup> In the second half, as ownership slowly grew more concentrated in corporate form (but dispersed in terms of individual owners), the influence of socially-liberal journalists may have reached parity or even overwhelmed owner bias, at least until the ‘80s when the pendulum swung back toward the Right.<sup>832</sup> None of these developments occurred in a vacuum occupied solely by media owners and journalists, however: broad cultural and political trends exerted effects on owners and journalists in a mutual feedback loop.

Ownership influence on the media is not an iron law, or a force that overwhelms all other influences on media content. Even one of the more ideological media owners, (the rightwing) Rupert Murdoch, hired (the leftwing) Thomas Frank to write an op-ed column. Furthermore, just as facts do not have wings, ideas do not emerge magically from interests

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<sup>829</sup> Ralph Miliband, "Communications in Capitalist Society," *Monthly Review* 65, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>830</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 5. However, Schudson misses the traditionally-rightwing perspectives, like protectionism and isolationism, that are also absent from mass media outlets in the U.S.

<sup>831</sup> S. Robert Lichter et al., *The Media Elite*, 6-7, 43-44.

<sup>832</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 182-185.

(as Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* famously bemoaned). Walter Lippman pointed out, "[t]he ordinary doctrine of self-interest usually omits altogether the cognitive function. So insistent is it on the fact that human beings finally refer all things to themselves, that it does not stop to notice that men's ideas of all things and of themselves are not instinctive. They are acquired."<sup>833</sup> In light of this point, Jeffrey Friedman asks: "How, after all, would the putative corporate manipulators of cultural media figure out the direction in which they should skew the messages broadcast by their companies, if not by means of stereotypes about the world that come to them from the cultural media to which they themselves have been exposed—such as the television they have watched or the newspapers they have read (or the education they have received)?"<sup>834</sup> There is a reflexive, interpenetrating relationship inherent in ownership bias. Media owners are not the first movers, an uncaused cause of ideological bias in the outlets they own; their ideology does not spring directly from their material interests, rather, it too is influenced by cultural media of various forms (among other factors).

This is where ecological thinking brings needed clarity: ownership bias is merely one force among many, and whatever ideological bias owners have is itself the product of an ecology of information in which it developed. (Furthermore, whether and how that ideological bias is exerted on a media outlet involves its own complexities: hiring ideologically-congenial editors and journalists is relatively simple, but issuing ideological directives that journalists follow obediently, without provoking attempts at subversion, or leaking out to the general public and hurting the outlet's credibility, is another matter.) Yet

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<sup>833</sup> Lippman, *Public Opinion*, 101.

<sup>834</sup> Jeffrey Friedman, "Public Opinion: Bringing the Media Back in," *Critical Review* 15, no. 3-4 (2003): 239-260.

despite the fact that our ideas are acquired, not instinctive; and despite the fact that the process of acquisition is the chaotic, unpredictable result of countless interactions in the ecology of information; nonetheless, we observe a strong correlation between having wealth and having political and economic ideas serving (or purporting to serve) to protect and increase one's wealth.<sup>835</sup> Likewise, there is a correlation between *not* having wealth and having ideas serving (or purporting to serve) to redistribute wealth to the poor.<sup>836</sup> Clearly, there is an elective affinity between social status and political/economic ideas. *How* that affinity works out in practice, connecting individuals of varying wealth with ideas perceived as more or less attractive, is a question of information ecology. It involves psychological predispositions from gene-environment interactions, and ideational influences from (and the *habitus* produced by) parents, relatives, friends, community, school, college, church, voluntary associations, entertainment and culture, advertising, and the news media.<sup>837</sup>

### **viii. Explanations for media bias: The economic model**

*"Power corrupts, but lack of power corrupts absolutely."*

- Adlai E. Stevenson, misquoting Lord Action

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<sup>835</sup> Benjamin I. Page et al., "Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 01 (2013).

<sup>836</sup> Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know*, 242-243.

<sup>837</sup> Harold Ordway Rugg, *An Introduction to Problems of American Culture* (Cambridge MA: Ginn and Company, 1931): 391-417. Chapter 17 of Rugg's textbook, "How Public Opinion Is Formed," provides one of the best discussions I have seen of the complex institutional and ideational ecology that produces people's ideology.

As we have seen, many who argue that the U.S. media displays a leftwing bias on social issues explain that bias as the result of primarily liberal journalists allowing their political ideology to seep into their reporting. On the other hand, many who argue that the media displays a rightwing bias on foreign policy issues often explain that bias as the result of primarily conservative media owners ensuring that their political ideology is expressed in the outlets they own. Another, very well-supported explanation proposes that media bias is best explained by economic factors: that bias is profitable.<sup>838</sup> Profitability helps explain not only political bias, but a bias away from good journalism and toward entertainment-focused news.<sup>839</sup> This is not necessarily a story of greed – which implies free choice and will – but of market pressures: the capitalist imperative articulated by Marx’s “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!”<sup>840</sup> Here, a *lack* of power is what corrupts; a lack of power in the face of market pressures which, if not accommodated, may lead to being weeded out of the market through bankruptcy or takeover.

In James Hamilton’s comprehensive analysis of television news in the U.S., he finds systematic bias in content and political ideology matching the ideological disposition of audience segments most desired by advertisers: women and young people.<sup>841</sup> Women are a desirable demographic because they make most purchasing decisions for households, and

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<sup>838</sup> Bias can also enter into media coverage from the opposite direction: to eliminate threats to *loss* of profits, as occurred when Richard Gephardt began a bid for president under a protectionist platform, and “the most multinational of all American industries, the prestige media, flayed” him (Ferguson, 1995, 261). More broadly: “Just as large profit-maximizing investors in parties do not pay to undermine themselves, major media (i.e., those big enough to have potentially significant effects on public opinion) controlled by large profit-maximizing investors do not encourage the dissemination of news and analyses that are likely to lead to popular indignation and, perhaps, government action hostile to the interests of all large investors, themselves included.” (Ferguson, 1995, 400)

<sup>839</sup> As Jürgen Habermas explains, “mass culture [and the “news” portion of the mass media] has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education...” (Habermas, 1991, 165)

<sup>840</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1915): 652.

<sup>841</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*.

young people are desirable because they are viewed by advertisers as easier to influence to develop (hopefully) lifetime brand loyalties. Hence news programs that attract more women and young people command higher advertising rates, producing greater profits.<sup>842</sup> Although young people make up only about one fifth of regular viewers of network news, they constitute nearly half of so-called “marginal viewers” – people who report that they only sometimes watch the news.<sup>843</sup> News programmers often take regular viewers for granted, and make programming decisions to attract marginal viewers. And since women and young people are more liberal than the U.S. average, the news media displays a liberal bias on social issues to attract them.

In an ideal media system, the only thing driving media coverage would be events and trends in the real world. In the real-world commercial media, however, audiences and their preferences drive coverage. As noted earlier, while the network news focuses on Republican-owned versus Democratic-owned issues by a 5-to-1 margin, as public opinion shifts toward the Democratic Party, television news covers more Democratic-owned issues – and when public opinion shifts toward the Republican Party, the ratio shifts further toward coverage of Republican-owned issues.<sup>844</sup> This trend of audience-driven coverage is powerfully illustrated by the example of crime: in Hamilton’s analysis, newspapers’ coverage of crime did not correspond to real-world trends in crime. Rather, newspapers’ coverage of crime corresponded to audience demographics: newspapers in cities with more elderly people focused less on violent crime, while newspapers in cities with more young males provided more salacious coverage of high-profile instances of violence,

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<sup>842</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>844</sup> Uscinski, *The People’s News*, 103.

regardless of changes in the real-world occurrence of violent crime.<sup>845</sup> This pattern of audience-driven news coverage applies to several other issues as well, with the media giving more attention to issues currently favored by audiences.<sup>846</sup> And since audiences generally disfavor public affairs information, the commercial media receives little economic benefit from providing it, producing a downward spiral of public ignorance.<sup>847</sup> Only in local markets with a high demand for hard news does the media generously provide it; soft news (human interest stories, health tips) is more widely prevalent in markets with higher proportions of advertiser-desired young women.<sup>848</sup>

The overall demographic composition of a city and the informational needs of its residents do not directly translate into patterns of newspaper coverage. “The market” does not ensure that media companies focus on what the population as a whole is interested in; only those residents who are desired by advertisers drive coverage. For instance, the incidence of poverty and food assistance in a city is actually *negatively* correlated with the number of stories about food assistance programs or poverty in that city.<sup>849</sup> Newspaper readers are less likely to be poor or using food stamps, and those who are poor are unattractive targets for advertisers in any case.

Profit pressures not only affect *what* is covered, but *how* it is covered. While newspapers and news programs do not have mottos like “the news that makes you feel good about what you already believe,” such a catchphrase<sup>850</sup> would be a more accurate

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<sup>845</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 154-159.

<sup>846</sup> Uscinski, *The People's News*, 63-70.

<sup>847</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 12.

<sup>848</sup> *Ibid.*, 139, 141.

<sup>849</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>850</sup> Or this observation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's: “God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please. You can never have both.” (quoted in Lewis, 2014, 1)

description of what they actually contain.<sup>851</sup> For example, in Hamilton's analysis of network news programs in 1999, the higher the percentage of men and women aged 18-34 who listed an issue as a top priority, the more stories were devoted to covering that issue.<sup>852</sup> (The issue priorities of those over 34 – who are less desirable to advertisers – had no statistically significant influence on network news coverage.) Since this younger demographic is more liberal than their elders, media companies seeking to attract young consumers to sell to advertisers are likely to cover issues and adopt perspectives liberals would find attractive.<sup>853</sup> Hence, when the media displays an apparent liberal bias, this is likely due less to journalists' liberalism (still less to media owners' conservatism) and more to the commercial media's profit-driven nature.

The oft-lamented tendency of the news media to focus on negative stories is also driven by commercial pressures. Since the 1940s, studies of newspapers have found that readers are drawn to negative headlines, helping to sell more newspapers than positive headlines.<sup>854</sup> This is in line with dozens of findings in experimental social psychology, that the human mind is more powerfully affected by and observant of negative than positive phenomena.<sup>855</sup>

The increasingly noticeable impact of commercial pressures on the content of the news is a leading driver of public distrust of the media.<sup>856</sup> In recent times, the level of public trust in the news media has fallen to precipitous lows, with a 2004 poll finding that only 10% of Americans having a great deal of confidence in the national news media

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<sup>851</sup> Uscinski, *The People's News*, 144.

<sup>852</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 100-102.

<sup>853</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>854</sup> Uscinski, *The People's News*, 21.

<sup>855</sup> Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger than Good."

<sup>856</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 117, 126.

(compared to 9% for lawyers).<sup>857</sup> Debra Clarke's in-depth study of news consumers in Canada found that the primary reason for dissatisfaction with the media is its profit-driven nature, which pushes it toward a focus on soft news and away from investigative reporting and the provision of background and context for news stories.<sup>858</sup> As a result, the news media tends toward uselessness for people looking to make sense of the political realm and how it affects their daily lives. This is as ironic as it is unfortunate: media companies' attempts to make the news more palatable and attractive to a wide audience has made the audience lose respect for the media.<sup>859</sup>

That the content of the news media is determined by market forces and commercial concerns is a powerful, *structural* hypothesis. It requires no conscious conspiracy on the part of media owners to distort the news; it emerges on its own due to structural features of the marketplace.<sup>860</sup> In the end, however, the market determination hypothesis has its problems.<sup>861</sup> Primary among them is the fact that even if media companies are largely at the mercy of the market, if some companies are relatively better than others at implementing profitmaking strategies then they also have the option of "subsidizing" other goals, like promoting their owners' ideology or business interests. Besides, the market determination hypothesis is a claim about the *long term*: that over a long enough period of time, only those media companies that cater to the whims of the market will survive. But over the "short term" – which can be years or decades – media companies can engage in

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<sup>857</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>858</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 179, 215, 227, 266.

<sup>859</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans Hate*, 197.

<sup>860</sup> Uscinski, *The People's News*, 8. Or as Michael Schudson puts it: "The chain newspapers are not so much politically conservative as economically risk-averse, which generally comes to the same thing." (Schudson, 1995, 175)

<sup>861</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 92.



ideological pursuits for long enough (before they are weeded out through market competition) to distort the public sphere, with lasting effects. A third possibility is that at times, the ideological interests of owners and the profit motive will converge – for instance, in providing supportive coverage of war that attracts a large audience.

#### **ix. Another structural explanation: The “propaganda model”**

*"During the Cold War, a group of Russian journalists toured the United States. On the final day of their visit, they were asked by their hosts for their impressions. 'I have to tell you,' said their spokesman, 'that we were astonished to find, after reading all the newspapers and watching TV, that all the opinions on all the vital issues were, by and large, the same. To get that result in our country, we imprison people, we tear out their fingernails. Here, you don't have that. What's the secret? How do you do it?'"*

- John Pilger, talk at Columbia University, April 4, 2006

*"The corporate grip on opinion in the United States is one of the wonders of the Western world. No First World country has ever managed to eliminate so entirely from its media all objectivity – much less dissent. Of course, it is possible for any citizen with time to spare, and a canny eye, to work out what is actually going on, but for the many there is no time, and the network news is the only news even though it may not be news at all but only a series of flashing fictions intended, like the avowed commercials, to keep docile huddle masses, keep avid for products addled consumers."*

Gore Vidal, "Cue the Green God, Ted"

There is another structural model of media bias similar to the economic model (or market determination hypothesis) that includes commercial pressures, but adds several other factors influencing the supply of information provided by the media. While the economic model of media bias explains why the news media tends toward sensationalism, soft news, and a lack of investigative reporting or the provision of significant context for current events, the so-called “propaganda model” attempts to explain why the media covers international affairs the way it does. (It was designed to explain the U.S. media, although in modified form it can apply to the media in other democracies as well.)<sup>862</sup> Many Americans are still reeling from the way the U.S. media covered the run-up to the invasion of Iraq: altogether too deferential to the Bush administration’s justifications for war and selective provision of misleading evidence about Iraq’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. This kind of deficient coverage is hardly a new development. In 1920, for instance, two of the era’s leading journalists wrote a scathing review of the *New York Times*’ coverage of the Russian Revolution, condemning it for an overreliance on official sources, a lack of independent investigation and fact-checking, and ideological bias. In their own words, “the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see.”<sup>863</sup> Similarly, the propaganda model is an attempt to explain why the media covers foreign policy in a manner scarcely distinguishable from outright propaganda, without suggesting the existence of any conspiracy involving journalists and government officials. Instead, like the market determination hypothesis, the propaganda model is purely *structural*; it explains propaganda-like results as emerging from structural features of the

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<sup>862</sup> See, e.g., Colin Sparks, “Extending and Refining the Propaganda Model,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>863</sup> Walter Lippman and Charles Merz, “A Test of the News,” *New Republic* 23, no. 296 (1920): 3.

media, not from any conscious intent on the part of journalists themselves, or conspiratorial directives from government official or media owners.<sup>864</sup>

The propaganda model, as elaborated by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in the late 1980s, proposes that five structural forces or influences act as filters upon the supply of information provided by the media, making some information more likely and other information less likely to appear in the news.<sup>865</sup> The five filters are: the size, ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media; the influence exerted by advertisers owing to the media's financial dependence on advertising revenue; source bias, or reliance upon official sources for information; "flak,"<sup>866</sup> or organized pressure on the media through boycott, criticism, lawsuits, and other means to influence coverage; and the ideology of journalists and media owners themselves (which was originally described as anticommunism in the '80s, and today could be described as neoliberalism or adherence to the "war on terror" framework).<sup>867</sup> A sixth filter has since been proposed: occasional direct government influence over the content of the news, by buying out or selectively providing misinformation to individual journalists (infamously, like Judith Miller of the *New York Times*).<sup>868</sup>

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<sup>864</sup> Despite exhaustive efforts to explain the structural (as opposed to conspiratorial) nature of the propaganda model, many persist in fundamentally misunderstanding it. As Edward Herman laments, some critics "cannot abide the notion that institutional factors can cause a 'free' media to act like lemmings in jointly disseminating false and even silly propaganda; such a charge must assume a conspiracy." (Herman, 2000, 104)

<sup>865</sup> Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

<sup>866</sup> For a vivid illustration of flak, read former *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times* reporter Kent MacDonald's description of the reaction he received after outing himself as a socialist (MacDonald, 1990).

<sup>867</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, "Judith Miller, the New York Times, and the Propaganda Model," *Journalism Studies* 5, no. 4 (2004): 436; Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, "Too Polemical or Too Critical? Chomsky on the Study of the News Media and US Foreign Policy," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 04 (2003): 556.

<sup>868</sup> Boyd-Barrett, "Judith Miller."

Cumulatively, these filters tend to result in a kind of journalism sharing some striking similarities with journalism in the Soviet Union and its allies. For instance, many Soviet journalists felt that they were independent and free of state censorship because they never experienced direct government intervention – invisible to them was the fact that their feeling of independence resulted from their ideological affinity with the Soviet elite.<sup>869</sup> Ironically, many Soviets argued that journalists in the U.S. were more constrained, due to the pressure of business interests on the press.<sup>870</sup> The Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, who experienced his country's news media under both communism and capitalism, considered that there has been little improvement, only changing mechanisms by which the common citizen is provided disinformation.<sup>871</sup>

The filters proposed by the propaganda model influence the ecology of information provided by the media without any widespread manipulation of journalists themselves. This is an important feature not only of the propaganda model, but a great deal of other non-conspiratorial explanations for media bias. Over a century ago, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that the wealthy control not only factories, but the means of producing ideas; they “rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.”<sup>872</sup> Or as Ralph Miliband wrote of journalists in 1969:

[T]hey mostly “say what they like”; but this is mainly because their employers mostly like what they say, or at least find little in what they say which is objectionable. These “cultural workmen” are unlikely to be greatly troubled by the

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<sup>869</sup> McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 129-130.

<sup>870</sup> Pickard, *America's Battle*, 130.

<sup>871</sup> Serrano, “Democracia e Liberdade,” 77.

<sup>872</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 2010): 64-65.

limitations and constriction imposed upon the mass media by the prevailing economic and political system, because their ideological and political makeup does not normally bring them up against these limitations. The leash they wear is sufficiently long to allow them as much freedom of movement as they themselves wish to have; and they therefore do not feel the strain; or not so as to make life impossible.<sup>873</sup>

More recently, a former producer at CBS explained simply that “everyone plays by the rules of the game if they want to stay in the game” – no heavy-handed referees are required, as pressures toward self-censorship are subtle and rarely explicit.<sup>874</sup> Rather, pressures influencing journalists are built in to the rules of the game, as when overly critical journalists lose access to top sources in government.<sup>875</sup> In legal scholar Stanley Ingber’s analysis:

[T]hose facts, ideas, and perspectives most likely to gain media access and, consequently, large scale public exposure, are those appealing to the self-interest of those individuals and groups who own and manage the media, to the mass audience whose patronage provides the economic and political basis for advertising, and to economic organizations whose commercial payments directly provide funds for the media. Because all these groups tend to embrace established values and traditional perspectives, media managers are unlikely to disseminate frequently those ideas

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<sup>873</sup> Miliband, “Communications in Capitalist Society,” 88.

<sup>874</sup> Quoted in Danny Schechter, *The More You Watch, The Less You Know: News Wars/(Sub)Merged Hopes/Media Adventures* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999): 53.

<sup>875</sup> Edwards and Cromwell, *Guardians of Power*, 148.

most challenging to conventional wisdom and the established power structure. The granting of media access accordingly is fraught with status quo biases.<sup>876</sup>

Structural explanations of media bias like the propaganda model seek to provide a picture of the ecology of information in the media; they describe the structural factors explaining why some perspectives, ideas, memes, or information are more likely to appear than others.<sup>877</sup> These structural explanations describe influences or filters operating on the media, not *determinants* as would be found in totalitarian societies.<sup>878</sup> The filters of the propaganda model are hardly omnipotent, and information often does evade or flow past them despite their being in effect,<sup>879</sup> like a net preventing large fish from passing but allowing minnows through.

Hence, structural explanations like the propaganda model can be criticized as “conspiratorial” only through misreading or misunderstanding. Nevertheless, sloppy criticism of exactly this sort has been made repeatedly.<sup>880</sup> Other critiques are merely weak<sup>881</sup> or argue that the propaganda model restates what other media researchers have pointed out before.<sup>882</sup> (Besides clearly inaccurate or underwhelming criticisms, the

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<sup>876</sup> Ingber, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” 39. These “status quo biases” parallel the *psychological* status quo biases coming from the demand side.

<sup>877</sup> Debra Clarke provides a comprehensive list of production constraints influencing the ecology of information in the media, resulting in limitations on the depth and quality of reporting, geographical areas covered, frames and perspectives offered, criticism of the private sector, variety of stories and formats, and many other areas. (Clarke, 2014, 96-97)

<sup>878</sup> Manning, *News and News Sources*, 37.

<sup>879</sup> Pedro, “The Propaganda Model,” 1892.

<sup>880</sup> See, e.g., Schudson, *The Power of News*, 4; Uscinski, *The People’s News*, 29.

<sup>881</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, “Noam Chomsky and the Manufacture of Consent for American Foreign Policy,” *Political Communication*, 21, no. 1 (2004); in response, see Jeffery Klaehn and Andrew Mullen, “The Propaganda Model and Sociology: Understanding the Media and Society,” *Synaesthesia: Communication across Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2010): 33-34.

<sup>882</sup> John Corner, “The Model in Question: A Response to Klaehn on Herman and Chomsky,” *European Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2003).

propaganda model has been largely ignored – even by researchers proposing quite similar structural models of media bias.)<sup>883</sup>

However, cogent criticisms of the propaganda model have been made, focusing on its questionable applicability outside of the United States and the extent to which it downplays counteracting forces.<sup>884</sup> For instance, while there have been no empirical falsifications of the propaganda model's hypotheses since its introduction, this is only to be expected in the narrow political culture and uncompetitive media market of the United States.<sup>885</sup> Countries with a broader spectrum of political ideology and with a stronger public media are less likely to be accurately described by the propaganda model. As to whether the propaganda model downplays counteracting forces like journalists' autonomy, Herman and Chomsky wrote that "dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda."<sup>886</sup> Whether their assessment is overly pessimistic is a matter for debate, and more importantly, empirical research.

So far, dozens of studies in Europe and North America (and one in Australia) have reinforced, refined, and extended the propaganda model of the media.<sup>887</sup> Other empirical investigations, while not explicitly using the propaganda model framework, have arrived at

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<sup>883</sup> Andrew Mullen, "Twenty Years On: The Second-Order Prediction of the Herman-Chomsky Propaganda Model," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>884</sup> Hardy, *Critical Political*, 44-46.

<sup>885</sup> Sparks, "Extending and Refining," 69, 81-82.

<sup>886</sup> Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, xii.

<sup>887</sup> Pedro, "The Propaganda Model," 1909; Klaehn and Mullen, "Sociology," 27; Peter Thompson, "Market Manipulation? Applying the Propaganda Model to Financial Media Reporting," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2009).

much the same conclusions after applying similar analyses.<sup>888</sup> As Edward Herman concluded his retrospective of the propaganda model a decade after its introduction: “[w]e are still waiting for our critics to provide a better model.”<sup>889</sup>

#### **x. The ecology of information in the media: Key influences**

*"The first duty of an editor is to gauge the sentiment of his reader, and then to tell them what they like to believe. ... His second duty is to see that nothing is said in the news items or editorials which may discountenance any claims or announcements made by the advertisers, discredit their standing or good faith, or expose many weaknesses or deception in any business venture that is or may become a valuable advertiser."*

- Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Business Enterprise*

The market determination hypothesis of media bias may be incomplete, and the propaganda model may be given to an overly deterministic reading; but together they provide a solid foundation for understanding the ecology of information in the news media. The commercial pressure to sell audiences to advertisers at the highest possible rate, incorporated with the five (or six) filters of the propaganda model, powerfully explain what makes some information, facts, memes, or perspectives rather than others more likely to appear in the news. Although a description of the ecology of information in the media could fit comfortably within the filter framework of the propaganda model, for ease of understanding I will elaborate the various ecological influences without dividing them into

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<sup>888</sup> See, e.g., Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and Us Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 147-162; Mullen, "Twenty Years On."

<sup>889</sup> Herman, "The Propaganda Model," 111.



discrete categories. (As in any ecological setting, causal or influencing factors are difficult to fully separate and disentangle from each other.)

Perhaps the most direct influence on journalists is the code of journalistic professionalism: the expectation that journalists should strive for objectivity and balance, and avoid promoting their own political opinions or preferences. In practice, this form of professionalism leads to several negative outcomes. A strength of the partisan journalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was that it provided context for current events by framing them within a larger political ideology; modern professional journalism, however, tends to avoid context altogether so as to evade any ideological influence.<sup>890</sup> Journalists focus instead on providing a balance of views from official sources, making the news seem like little more than a concentrated stream of facts and official statements. Indeed, journalistic professionalism makes politics itself seem like nothing more than the official pronouncements of government representatives, or personalized conflicts between politicians. So too, it fragments the social world into a set of separate, seemingly disconnected and decontextualized events, while ignoring real social divisions in its presentations to an artificially unified, as-large-as-possible audience.<sup>891</sup> To the extent that they internalize the code of professionalism, journalists (ironically) put on uniquely pernicious ideological blinders, of the invisible, “nonideological” variety. “An aversion to abstractions and philosophical issues may leave only unquestioned assumptions that are experienced as instinct. Many journalists who fancy themselves tough-minded pragmatists are instead captives of conventional wisdom, carriers of intellectual currents whose validity is taken

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<sup>890</sup> McChesney, *The Political Economy*, 33.

<sup>891</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 92.

for granted.”<sup>892</sup> These invisible blinders are difficult to remove, as Nicholas Garnham attests: “Isolated from his audience by the nature of his medium, the broadcaster has allowed professional standards, validated by the judgement of his peers, to become an end in themselves and a very real barrier between himself and the public. Criticism from outside the magic circle can be dismissed.”<sup>893</sup>

The problems with contemporary journalistic professionalism are linked to the broader problem of source bias.<sup>894</sup> Not only is a reliance on official sources (government and business spokespeople) part of the code of journalistic professionalism, but it is also half of a symbiosis between journalists and politicians: both need each other for professional survival and success.<sup>895</sup> This produces strong pressures on politicians to focus their efforts on issues that the media will want to cover, and strong pressures on journalists to develop friendly relationships with politicians to gain access to fresh information. (This sort of *quid pro quo* between journalists and their sources is also evident in business journalism, with company insiders trading private information in exchange for positive media coverage.)<sup>896</sup>

Source bias favors government officials in several ways.<sup>897</sup> The number of journalists and other media resources devoted to covering the government vastly exceeds that of any other sector. The amount and type of coverage of government officials is also exceptional: they receive more airtime, and get to communicate their messages via pre-

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<sup>892</sup> Lichter et al., *The Media Elite*, 297.

<sup>893</sup> Nicholas Garnham, *Structures of Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1978): 32.

<sup>894</sup> Pedro, “The Propaganda Model,” 1915-1916.

<sup>895</sup> See, e.g., Aeron Davis, “Investigating Journalist Influences on Political Issue Agendas at Westminster,” *Political Communication* 24, no. 2 (2007); Manning, *News and News Sources*, 55.

<sup>896</sup> Alexander Dyck and Luigi Zingales, “The Media and Asset Prices,” Working Paper, Harvard Business School, 2003.

<sup>897</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 93-94.

planned speeches, interviews, and press conferences. The way the media covers the government and its reliance on official sources leaves it open to manipulation by political operatives, who can create “newsworthy” events and manufacture conflicts – worst of all, they can cynically leverage journalistic norms of objectivity and balance to ensure that the media disseminates the most baseless of allegations and distortions.<sup>898</sup> Critics of the government rarely get such desirable media access, let alone the same amount of media attention. Pedrinho Guareschi’s observations about media exposure in the electoral context also explain the significance of media attention more broadly:

One of the most surprising facts for social and political analysts is the finding that the absolute majority of candidates who have a presence in the media, both on the Right and the Left, get elected. Why this phenomenon? One well-supported explanation is that such candidates manage to raise their heads above the “vulgar profane,” above the multitudes of individuals, the systematized, planned, homogenized, standardized masses. They manage to excel, to “be distinguished.” And this is enough. The simple fact of being visible, of being seen by a multitude of people that merely “watch” the programs of the media confers on these personalities “special” characteristics, providing them the status of being worthy of attention and votes. ... [T]hey become the only ones who “exist.”<sup>899</sup>

Source bias does not exclusively favor government; rather, it operates to give an advantage in media access to any powerful social group whether in government or business, while

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<sup>898</sup> Ibid., 250-251.

<sup>899</sup> Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 82, translation mine. Michael Schudson makes much the same point: “Visibility is important in itself. The greatest media effects may not be measurable influences on attitudes or beliefs produced by media slant but the range of information the media make available to individual human minds, the range of connections they bring to light... Their capacity to *publicly include* is perhaps their most important feature.” (Schudson, 1995, 24-25)

further marginalizing groups without political or financial power. Those groups with power are more newsworthy simply by virtue of their greater influence and capacity to influence decision-making in other organizations; they have higher credibility stemming from their greater authority; they possess more information of value to journalists; they can better control information flows emerging from their organizations; they have more material and other resources at hand; and they enjoy greater bargaining power with journalists.<sup>900</sup> Powerfully illustrating this analysis, a study of U.S. network news in 2001 by German research firm Media Tenor found that political and business elites were the predominant sources used.<sup>901</sup> 75 percent were Republicans, 25 percent were Democrats, and a mere one percent were Independents or members of other political parties; women made up only 15 percent of sources, and Whites made up 92 percent of the total; business representatives were over 35 times more prevalent as sources than representatives of labor unions. And as media companies cut more and more jobs for journalists, those who remain are less able to engage in investigative journalism, and more dependent upon powerful sources in government and business.<sup>902</sup>

Another under-recognized problem with sources is the prevalence and sway of public relations specialists over the news media. Over the past century, public relations (or corporate propaganda) has grown into a major social influence, beginning with its first major success: eliminating the “threat” posed by the New Deal by convincing the American public that the so-called free enterprise system is superior to European-style social democracy.<sup>903</sup> By 2009, for every journalist in the U.S., there were four public relations

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<sup>900</sup> Manning, *News and News Sources*, 150.

<sup>901</sup> Ina Howard, “Power Sources,” FAIR, May 1, 2002, <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/power-sources/>.

<sup>902</sup> Manning, *News and News Sources*, 167.

<sup>903</sup> Carey, *Taking the Risk*.

specialists or managers.<sup>904</sup> And their influence is significant: an estimated 40% of all news reports are unedited copy written by public relations specialists to look like objective journalism.<sup>905</sup> The military has also taken to public relations as part of its “information operations” strategy, recently spending nearly \$5 billion on PR in one year.<sup>906</sup>

Perhaps nowhere else is source bias more dangerous than in coverage of international conflict. Here, the media’s reliance on official sources tends toward a faithful adherence to the government’s favored narrative; in less delicate terms, propaganda. The U.S. media played precisely this role during the majority of the Vietnam War, after the Truman and Eisenhower administration had greatly strengthened the federal government’s ability and inclination to control the flow of information to the media.<sup>907</sup> More recently, the media acted as a *de facto* propaganda arm of the government in the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, simply by uncritically communicating hundreds of misleading or untruthful assertions by members of the Bush administration.<sup>908</sup> In times of *sudden* war or violent conflict, the media’s dependence on official sources can be particularly damaging, as journalists are especially likely to retransmit the narrative provided by government officials without having time to critically investigate it.<sup>909</sup> Source bias forms one of the propaganda model’s filters, and one of its manifestations has been studied under the name of “indexing.”<sup>910</sup> This occurs when journalists “index” the

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<sup>904</sup> Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again* (New York: Nation Books, 2011): 290.

<sup>905</sup> Mark Dowie, "Introduction: Torches of Liberty," in *Toxic Sludge is Good For You! Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, 1-4 (New York: Common Courage Press, 1995): 2.

<sup>906</sup> Associated Press, “Pentagon Sets Sights on Public Opinion,” *MSNBC* (February 5, 2009).

<sup>907</sup> Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (University of Chicago Press, 1995): 15-17, 170-179.

<sup>908</sup> Lewis, *935 Lies*, 253-259.

<sup>909</sup> Chiara de Franco, *Media Power and the Transformation of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 177.

<sup>910</sup> Herring and Robinson, “Too Polemical,” 557.

range of views expressed within government debate about an issue, instead of the range of views expressed among the population as a whole. Indexing, then, tends to fill the public sphere with only the range of views expressed in public government debate, effectively silencing positions and perspectives that are not publicly propounded by government officials.<sup>911</sup> The indexing hypothesis was powerfully confirmed in a study of four years of *New York Times*' coverage of funding for the Nicaraguan *contras*: the ratio of opposition to support in the paper's editorial pages closely followed changes in the ratio of opposition to support in Congress.<sup>912</sup> A later test of the indexing hypothesis in a different foreign policy scenario found that the President rather than Congress controlled the terms of debate in the *Times*, and a lack of opposition in Congress forced the paper to index foreign elites to provide some weak balance.<sup>913</sup> The same pattern of indexing foreign elites when Congressional opposition is lacking was found in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.<sup>914</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, evidence suggests that the nature of indexing (and of the propaganda model's ideology filter) has changed. Instead of indexing only the range of debate in Congress, the media may be more likely to index a wider range of elite sources. A

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<sup>911</sup> Bennett elaborated on the insidious danger posed by what might otherwise seem an innocuous form of source bias:

Not only do these different slices of press reality begin to converge when interpreted with the indexing hypothesis, but we begin to see how actors at all levels in the system can rationalize indexing as the fairest possible way to cover U.S. politics. Let the institutional representatives of the people speak, and if the people don't like it, they can vote for somebody else. The trouble with this rationalization is that in the modern era of big money, skillful electoral marketing, and a cynical and withdrawn electorate, the people have little chance to correct the ills of the system at the ballot box. Perhaps more important, the images that flow from indexing are not likely to acknowledge any ills in the system to begin with. Barring the unlikely event of major powerholders criticizing the system that keeps them in power, indexed news stories of even the most investigative and adversarial sort will end with the conclusion that "the system works." (Bennett, 1990, 123)

<sup>912</sup> W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990).

<sup>913</sup> Scott L. Althaus et al., "Revising the Indexing Hypothesis: Officials, Media, and the Libya Crisis," *Political Communication* 13, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>914</sup> Entman, *Projections of Power*, 153.

study comparing media coverage of conflicts with communist versus non-communist countries found significantly greater reliance on the range of debate in Congress when communism was involved.<sup>915</sup> (This is also evidence for the effects of the propaganda model's ideology filter.) Another study of media coverage of the early "war on terror" found that the media was again indexing foreign elites since opposition in Congress was lacking – however, these foreign voices of opposition tended to be marginalized in coverage.<sup>916</sup>

While some argue that the commercial media is becoming more independent of government influence,<sup>917</sup> a study of recent newspaper coverage of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal found that the mainstream press closely followed the traditional pattern of indexing, providing attention only to the views of government elites even in the absence of meaningful debate; only the alternative press provided any serious coverage of dissenting voices.<sup>918</sup>

Another key facet of the media's ecology of information arises from social psychology. For instance, "pack journalism," a phenomenon wherein a large number of journalists cluster around a news site, copy and share information, and fail to confirm data using independent sources, has been proposed as a form of groupthink.<sup>919</sup> But pack journalism is likely to be merely an extreme example of the more general force of social influence and pressure. Social groups help reduce individual uncertainty by allowing for

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<sup>915</sup> John Zaller and Dennis Chiu, "Government's Little Helper: US Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1991," *Political Communication* 13, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>916</sup> Andre Billeaudeau et al., "News Norms, Indexing and a Unified Government: Reporting During the Early Stages of a Global War on Terror," *Global Media Journal* 2, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>917</sup> See, e.g., Brian McNair, "From Control to Chaos: Towards a New Sociology of Journalism," *Media, Culture & Society* 25, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>918</sup> W. Lance Bennett, et al., "None Dare Call It Torture: Indexing and the Limits of Press Independence in the Abu Ghraib Scandal," *Journal of Communication* 56, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>919</sup> Jonathan Matusitz and Gerald-Mark Breen, "An Examination of Pack Journalism as a Form of Groupthink: A Theoretical and Qualitative Analysis," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 22, no. 7 (2012).

the creation of a group consensus, which makes one's (shared) beliefs and opinions seem valid and reliable.<sup>920</sup> In the context of journalism, social pressure produces a snowball effect: an emerging consensus among journalists becomes harder and harder to challenge, not only because it is more psychologically satisfying to go along with the group, but copying the consensus is easier and cheaper, and challenging the consensus may negatively impact a journalist's reputation.<sup>921</sup> (The internet likely adds speed and strength to this snowball effect.)<sup>922</sup> In a survey of journalists in Germany, Italy, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S., a majority in each country said that wire services, other journalists in their own newsrooms, and journalists at leading national media outlets were all important sources of guidance in making their own news decisions.<sup>923</sup> (Editors too can be subject to similar social-psychological pressures.)<sup>924</sup> As one respected journalist explains,

[W]hen you hang around with other journalists, be it in Washington, D.C., or Shanghai, China, you all recirculate the same information. After a while that body of information becomes the common wisdom, which clouds your ability to process what you are seeing for yourself. Worse, when everyone is writing the same thing, a laziness sets in, and there's a tendency to accept what has been written as fact.<sup>925</sup>

This phenomenon was clearly in effect during 2002, when journalists uniformly reported that weapons inspectors had been *thrown out* of Iraq in 1998 by the Saddam regime;

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<sup>920</sup> Wolfgang Donsbach, "Psychology of News Decisions: Factors behind Journalists' Professional Behavior," *Journalism* 5, no. 2 (2004): 138-139.

<sup>921</sup> Hamilton, *All the News*, 22-23.

<sup>922</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>923</sup> Donsbach, "Psychology of News," 140-142.

<sup>924</sup> See, e.g., Tsan-Kuo Chang and Jae-Won Lee, "US Gatekeepers and the New World Information Order: Journalistic Qualities and Editorial Positions," *Political Communication* 10, no. 3 (1993).

<sup>925</sup> Maurice Murad, "Shouting at the Crocodile," in *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press*, ed. Kristina Borjesson, 77-102 (Amherst NY: Prometheus books, 2002): 88.



whereas four years earlier, journalists had consistently reported instead that the inspectors had been *withdrawn* in anticipation of a U.S. bombing offensive.<sup>926</sup>

Social pressures toward conformity among journalists are strengthened by their demographic similarities.<sup>927</sup> Scattered studies of demographic characteristics of journalists in Africa, Europe, and North America reveal that journalists tend to be disproportionately male and come from middle class families. Journalism is a demanding profession with irregular and long working hours, and what little leisure time journalists have is often spent in the company of other journalists. This further restricts journalists' exposure to the experiences of members of other social groups, and strengthens the in-group bond shared by journalists.

Journalists can also be influenced by social pressure emanating from the groups they are covering. For instance, financial journalists have widely adopted the pro-market ideology of the financial market participants they cover,<sup>928</sup> and the business media has largely adopted the suppositions and perspectives of central bank elites.<sup>929</sup> The existence of such influence on those whose job it is to critically monitor the economy has kept the public uninformed about and unprepared for the inflation and popping of serial economic bubbles. Doubtless too that reporters embedded with military units are influenced by

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<sup>926</sup> Edwards and Cromwell, *Guardians of Power*, 37-41.

<sup>927</sup> Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 79-85; 202-203.

<sup>928</sup> Aeron Davis, "Mediation, Financialization, and the Global Financial Crisis: An Inverted Political Economy Perspective," in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 241-254 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

<sup>929</sup> Marc-André Pigeon, "The Wizard of Oz: Peering behind the Curtain on the Relationship between Central Banks and the Business Media," in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, ed. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin, 255-271 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

social pressures to adopt the views of the soldiers they live and work with, and who protect them.<sup>930</sup>

As discussed earlier, the heart of the economic determination hypothesis is that the pressure for profits influences what and how the media cover issues. This is a “retail” influence, emanating from the need to sell audiences to advertisers. The propaganda model, however, points toward a very different kind of commercial pressure influencing the media. This is more of a wholesale, systemic influence emanating from the owners of media themselves, and the need to avoid displeasing companies that pay for advertisements. Both kinds of commercial influence bring to the fore the fundamental conflict between the requirements of democracy and the demands of capitalism:<sup>931</sup> the news media is forced to choose between coverage that attracts audiences and pleases advertisers while contributing little to good citizenship, and coverage that serves the public good but draws a smaller audience and displeases advertisers.<sup>932</sup> As one newspaper editor noted in the 1940s, the framers of the constitution could not foresee that the press would become so heavily reliant on advertising, hence more dependent on “commercial interests than upon the people.”<sup>933</sup> As a result of this oversight, the U.S. and other liberal democracies have developed checks and balances to ensure that the *government* cannot unduly influence or control the media, but no measures to protect the media from private influence and control.<sup>934</sup>

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<sup>930</sup> David Miller, "Information Dominance: The Philosophy of Total Propaganda Control," in *War, Media, and Propaganda: A Global Perspective*, ed. Yahya R. Kamalipour and Nancy Snow, 7-16 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004): 10.

<sup>931</sup> Former CBS news director Fred Friendly once quipped, “[t]elevision makes so much [money] at its worst that it can’t afford to do its best.” (Quoted in Uscinski, 2014, 110)

<sup>932</sup> Uscinski, *The People’s News*, 11-17.

<sup>933</sup> Quoted in Pickard, *America’s Battle*, 132.

<sup>934</sup> Curran, *Media and Power*, 224.

Ownership of media outlets confers side benefits of power and influence not granted by owning companies in most other industries, which is the likely reason why private control of media firms is highly concentrated, and widely-dispersed ownership is less common in the news media than in other businesses. In one economic study of 97 countries, only four percent of media enterprises were found to be widely held, a result the economist authors found “extreme” and indicative that “both the governments and the controlling private shareholders get the same benefit from controlling media outlets: the ability to influence public opinion and the political process.”<sup>935</sup>

Dependence on ad revenue and the need to avoid displeasing advertisers also leaves a number of noticeable effects on media coverage.<sup>936</sup> The needs, desires, and interests of the poor and ethnic minorities tend to be ignored in favor of covering whatever will attract wealthier audiences.<sup>937</sup> News reports and editorials will tend to treat the products and business interests of advertisers with kid gloves,<sup>938</sup> and media formats will be designed to create a “buying mood” among viewers and readers.<sup>939</sup> Also, partisanship and controversial topics will tend to be avoided to prevent offending advertisers’ potential customers, avoid

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<sup>935</sup> Simeon Djankov et al., “Who Owns the Media?” *Journal of Law and Economics* 46 (2003): 357.

<sup>936</sup> Baker, “Advertising,” 2139, 2167; Hardy, *Critical Political*, 144-147; 152-154.

<sup>937</sup> “If media usage promotes political interest, particularly among those to whose political interests the media responds, and if, as economic analysis predicts, advertising leads the media to be oriented toward the more affluent, then the advertising-supported media should stimulate political interest primarily among the comparatively affluent. Thus, advertising’s subsidy not only distributes news in an even less egalitarian manner than would a market system where readers pay the full costs of the paper, but it also quite likely depresses political participation of the poor.” (Baker, 1992, 2166-2167)

<sup>938</sup> “[M]ost observers conclude that advertisers’ concerns result in extensive media ‘self-censorship,’ sometimes even unconscious censorship reflecting ingrained knowledge of the boundaries of what is permissible. Knowledge of occasional advertiser retaliations for violations of their interests, even if the media sturdily resisted the influence in the particular publicized example, creates a pervasive awareness that deviation can be costly.” (Baker, 1992, 2142)

<sup>939</sup> “To the extent that the media responds to [the demonstrated] concern [of advertisers] with packaging, it is guided by neither what the viewers want nor what media professionals think the public needs. Instead, advertisers pay the media to provide content the advertiser believes will leave that audience emotionally and intellectually most vulnerable to commercial messages.” (Baker, 1992, 2154)

boycotts, and maximize the audience.<sup>940</sup> Together, these effects result in a form of legal corruption: while a political representative or a judge would go to jail for taking money in exchange for influence, every day media companies receive advertising money from businesses looking to exert influence over the public sphere.<sup>941</sup> And while Panglossian economists may engage in rhetorical and mathematical gymnastics to argue that the advertising model produces the best of all possible worlds, where consumers', media companies', and advertisers' interests meet in a happy equilibrium, their argument relies on patently unrealistic assumptions about information. Edwin Baker argues instead that: Constant opportunities arise for the media enterprise to secretly allow advertiser influence. Of course, there is a word for selling influence to the advertiser and purity to the consumer. Fraud. The media purports to give the reader an untainted product under circumstances where it is difficult for the reader to identify the deception. All the economic reasons why fraud should be prohibited apply here. The media enterprise "externalizes" harm onto readers who, because of lack of knowledge, cannot "efficiently" bring the economic "injury" to bear on the media enterprise's decision making. The reader's only recourse is to gather information about advertiser influence and then engage in joint action with all the other injured parties against the offending media enterprise. Usually such information gathering and collective action are just too expensive to be an effective deterrent.<sup>942</sup>

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<sup>940</sup> "First, controversial material may provoke critical thought believed to be inconsistent with a 'buying mood.' Second, because advertisers' economic interests are advanced by dominant values and since controversy normally exists when these values are challenged, controversial content often will be contrary to advertisers' interests. Third, partisan material may lose a portion of the audience that the media enterprise wants to capture in order to "sell" a larger audience to the advertiser. Fourth, and differing from the objective of attracting the largest possible audience, is the desire not to offend any potential customer. This is a major concern for advertisers." (Baker, 1992, 2156-2157)

<sup>941</sup> Serrano, "Democracia e Liberdade," 73.

<sup>942</sup> Baker, "Advertising," 2174.

Businesses are also a primary source of “flak,” another of the propaganda model’s filters, in the form of criticism, threatening lawsuits and boycotts, and other pressure tactics. For instance, the threat of a tobacco company lawsuit convinced CBS to kill a *60 Minutes* story on corporate malfeasance in the industry.<sup>943</sup> A former CEO of CNN stated in an interview that after the station presented reports of the killing of Afghan civilians during the U.S. invasion, “big people in corporations were calling up and saying, ‘You’re being anti-American here.’”<sup>944</sup> This influenced him to instruct CNN journalists to reduce its coverage of civilian casualties. Also, the conglomerate structure of many media companies increases their vulnerability to flak from other companies. For example, book publishing subsidiaries of *Reader’s Digest* and *Time* canceled publication of books critical of the advertising industry and Dupont, respectively, after their parent companies were threatened with advertising boycotts.<sup>945</sup> To argue that such anecdotal evidence of business pressure does not prove its pervasive influence is akin to the claim that hot stoves are not particularly dangerous for children, since most of them get burned only once. Of course most children only burn themselves once on a stove; after the experience, they learn not to touch it. The problem of business influence over the news media is possibly at its most dangerous in the realm of foreign policy. In an empirical analysis comparing the sources of influence on U.S. government officials’ foreign policy decisions, business leaders were found to exert far and away the greatest control, while public opinion produced no statistically measurable effect.<sup>946</sup> This is a profoundly disturbing result for a democracy. Part of the reason for this

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<sup>943</sup> Lewis, *935 Lies*, 142-144.

<sup>944</sup> Quoted in Pedro, “The Propaganda Model,” 1886.

<sup>945</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 38-41.

<sup>946</sup> Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, “Who Influences US Foreign Policy?” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 01 (2005).

finding may be that media effects on public opinion are greatest for issues like foreign policy; so it is certainly within the realm of possibility that business influence over media content may be exerted to ensure that public opinion on international affairs is never sufficiently informed and aroused to jeopardize the control over foreign policy enjoyed by business leaders. This influence need not be direct; advertiser pressure to create a “buying mood” and avoid controversy may produce the same effect without any intentional control.<sup>947</sup>

Just as businesses directly influence the content of news to achieve their interests, there is significant evidence that the U.S. government has been doing the same for decades. During the Cold War, the list of U.S. media outlets that cooperated with the CIA reads like nothing less than a description of the core of the U.S. media system: CBS, ABC, NBC, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, Hearst Newspapers, Scripps-Howard, and others.<sup>948</sup> The details of such cooperation have remained largely undisclosed; but as a leading intelligence analyst put it, “one fact was incontrovertible: the CIA-media relationship had evolved by the late 1950s into a complicated matrix of people, activities and bonds of association.”<sup>949</sup> For instance, in the 1950s CBS founder William Paley allowed the CIA to screen news reels, eavesdrop on conversations between journalists, and allowed CIA agents to operate as CBS correspondents.<sup>950</sup> A 1976 Senate investigation into the CIA revealed the outlines of these extensive ties with the media (and academia, though the CIA refused to reveal details about

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<sup>947</sup> Baker, “Advertising,” 2153-2164.

<sup>948</sup> Carl Bernstein, “How America’s Most Powerful News Media Worked Hand in Glove with the Central Intelligence Agency and Why the Church Committee Covered It Up,” *Rolling Stone* (October, 22, 1977): 56.

<sup>949</sup> Loch K. Johnson, “The CIA and the Media,” *Intelligence and National Security* 1, no. 2 (1986): 145.

<sup>950</sup> Lewis, *935 Lies*, 158-159.

these relationships during the investigation).<sup>951</sup> One key disclosure was the CIA's planting of anti-Allende propaganda in Chile, some of which later resurfaced as objective fact in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.<sup>952</sup> (The democratically-elected Allende was later overthrown in a coup, resulting in a military dictatorship responsible for the deaths and torture of thousands.) Another aspect of the relationship was the high level at which the CIA exercised influence at leading U.S. media outlets; as one former CIA official testified, "[y]ou don't need to manipulate *Time* magazine, for example, because there are Agency people at the management level."<sup>953</sup>

Although the CIA promised to scale back their media operations under pressure from the Senate investigation, they have continued in some (undisclosed) fashion.<sup>954</sup> Today, there is a high likelihood that intelligence agencies continue to work closely with the media, particularly since the U.S. military and political establishment has developed an approach toward information as a form of weaponry.<sup>955</sup> In fact, the Pentagon currently considers information to be one domain, along with land, air, sea, and space, in which the U.S. should exercise "full spectrum dominance."<sup>956</sup> Part of the military's strategy to exercise full spectrum dominance in the information domain is the practice of selectively providing information to media outlets, and embedding reporters in military units.<sup>957</sup> Embedded journalists have been shown to produce reports more favorable to the military, focusing on

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<sup>951</sup> Bernstein, "How America's," 65.

<sup>952</sup> Johnson, "The CIA and the Media," 158.

<sup>953</sup> Bernstein, "How America's," 66.

<sup>954</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>955</sup> Boyd-Barrett, "Judith Miller," 447.

<sup>956</sup> Miller, "Information Dominance," 7.

<sup>957</sup> Robin Brown, "Spinning the War: Political Communications, Information Operations and Public Diplomacy in the War on Terrorism," in *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman, 87-100 (London: Sage, 2003); de Franco, *Media Power*, 180.

specific events to the exclusion of broad themes.<sup>958</sup> Both the U.S. and British military have begun programs to intervene on internet forums and social media to attempt to influence online debate.<sup>959</sup> Another aspect of the strategy is, doubtlessly, intelligence agencies' continued relationships with journalists and media companies. Judith Miller, the *New York Times* reporter who introduced the U.S. public to faulty intelligence about Iraq's nonexistent WMD programs, may be the most prominent example of this continuing relationship.<sup>960</sup> This adds a more overt, direct filter to the propaganda model: instead of passive filters straining *out* some pieces of information, the relationship between intelligence agencies and the media suggests the active *insertion* of pieces of information favorable to the government into the media ecology.

## **xi. Conclusion**

*"The men of letters who have rendered the greatest services to the small number of thinking beings spread over the world are the isolated writers, the true scholars shut in their studies, who have neither argued on the benches of the universities, nor told half-truths in the academies; and almost all of them have been persecuted. Our wretched species is so made that those who walk on the well-trodden path always throw stones at those who are opening a new road. ... Compose some odes in praise of My Lord Superbus Fadus, some madrigals for his mistress; dedicate a book on geography to his doorkeeper, and you will be well received; enlighten mankind, and you will be exterminated."*

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<sup>958</sup> Michael Pfau, "Embedded Reporting During the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq: How the Embedding of Journalists Affects Television News Reports," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>959</sup> Roslyn Fuller, *Beasts and Gods: How Democracy Changed Its Meaning and Lost Its Purpose* (London: Zed Books, 2015): 315-317.

<sup>960</sup> Boyd-Barrett, "Judith Miller."



- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, "Men of Letters"

Clearly, the U.S. is far from enjoying the kind of marketplace of ideas central to democratic theory and essential for the proper functioning of any democracy worthy of the name. The early United States was the envy of the enlightened world for its democratic government and media system. Over time, however, its news media has lost ground; as technology developed and political and economic ideologies evolved, the U.S. media has become too reliant on and influenced by both business and government. The marketplace of ideas it offers is one in which providers of ideas supporting the status quo enjoy a near monopoly, crowding out those trying to offer critical perspectives. (At least today, Voltaire's warning about extermination seems a rhetorical flourish rather than a description of reality.)

This is of serious concern, as attested by recent media failures in reporting on Iraq, economic bubbles, and climate change. Edwin Baker's warning should be widely heard and heeded:

I share the sense of many keen observers in this country and around the world that American democracy is in trouble. America's strikingly inegalitarian domestic policy is surely unjust; policy choices systematically favoring private consumption over public use of resources are incredibly unwise; and much of our foreign policy is not only immoral and illegal but entirely counterproductive from the perspective of any rational conception of domestic self-interest. Whether these policies reflect, as the democratic faith demands, views dominant within the public sphere is unclear.

However, if that public sphere is itself uninformed or misinformed, if it is not robust in its debate of values and policies, any democratic faith is short-changed.<sup>961</sup>

The news media is the primary force shaping the ecology of information in modern societies. As it currently stands in the United States, the media produces an ecology favoring certain ideas over others, making it more likely that some memes will spread at the expense of others, and influencing the likelihood that certain perspectives will be more widely adopted than others. The ideas, memes, and perspectives favored in this ecology are those that benefit or are attractive to groups with power in society. Demographic groups with more disposable income tend to influence the supply of information simply because the media caters to their desires and prejudices to increase ad revenue. Large businesses pressure the media in several ways to offer a supply of information favorable to their interests, making information about corporate malfeasance or unsustainable economic trends less available in the public sphere. The government controls the supply of publicly-available information about its own workings by controlling the media's access to it, unduly influencing the public's judgment about its policies and the alternatives to them.

The cumulative result of these political-economic pressures on the ecology of information in society is to keep the public sphere closely tethered to the status quo. With the exception of a liberal bias on social issues, the media as currently constituted is drawn by its political economy into spreading ideas and opinions supportive of those with political and economic power. Those who seek to change the status quo – whether crackpots or geniuses, prophets or charlatans – find themselves without an effective voice. In this ecology of information, ideas pushing in the direction of social evolution rather than

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<sup>961</sup> Baker, *Media Concentration*, 201-202.

stasis find poor soil and an inhospitable climate. Surely, for the health of this society as much as any other, this must change.

## Chapter 6

### Comparing Media Systems Worldwide – What a Difference Supply Makes

*“The free press is the ubiquitous vigilant eye of a people's soul, the embodiment of a people's faith in itself, the eloquent link that connects the individual with the state and the world, the embodied culture that transforms material struggles into intellectual struggles and idealises their crude material form. It is a people's frank confession to itself, and the redeeming power of confession is well known. It is the spiritual mirror in which a people can see itself, and self-examination is the first condition of wisdom. “*

- Karl Marx, “On Freedom of the Press”

In the century and a half since one of the world's best-known journalists wrote these words, the media has become ever more an indispensable “link that connects the individual with the state and the world.” Today, if a fact or aspect of reality does not appear in the media, it seems not to exist – and might as well not exist insofar as public opinion is concerned. The Prince of Machiavelli's day has been replaced by the Electronic Prince, the media, which enjoys a hegemonic role in modern societies. As Pedro Gilberto Gomes observes, “it is increasingly the case that for something to be recognized as real, it must first be mediatized.”<sup>1</sup>

The central position of the media in modern politics makes it a political issue of foremost importance. The media is the “locus of societal understanding,”<sup>2</sup> it is the infrastructure of the public sphere. A malfunctioning media guarantees a malfunctioning

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<sup>1</sup> Pedro Gilberto Gomes, *Filosofia e Ética da Comunicação na Midiatização da Sociedade* (São Leopoldo RS: Editora Unisinos, 2006): 135, translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 121, translation mine.

public sphere, makes democracy an impossibility, and vitiates the promise of self-government. Venício de Lima writes:

Without the right to a public voice – the right to speak and be heard – the free citizen does not exist. Without a democratic public opinion, the principle of popular sovereignty cannot be established. ... The failure to constitute a *democratic* public opinion is a central impasse today, because it structurally affects the formation of democratic legitimacy in all areas requiring decisive historical changes.<sup>3</sup>

This perspective hardly differs from that of Thomas Jefferson, who recognized that since a democracy is guided by the will of the people, that will must be enlightened – not manipulated, manufactured, or unduly influenced by one voice or one chorus that drowns out all others.<sup>4</sup>

To allow the formation of a truly democratic public opinion, the media must at a minimum distribute information about public affairs, allow a free public exchange of ideas and arguments, and establish a link of responsiveness between those who govern and those who are governed.<sup>5</sup> Put another way, the media's role is to serve as a "guardian" of the flow of information, a public forum for the discussion of diverse and conflicting ideas, and a watchdog against abuse of government power.<sup>6</sup> In this role, the media must divulge all relevant information about people in (or seeking) power; it must display equal concern for the information needs of all; it must offer a means of separating truth from lies; and it

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<sup>3</sup> Venício A. de Lima, "Normas Legais da Comunicação Social: Interesse Privado vs Interesse Público," in *Em Defesa de uma Opinião Pública Democrática*, ed. Venício A. de Lima et al., 169-196 (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014): 10-12, translation and emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Michael McGuire, "Media Influence and the Modern American Democracy: Why the First Amendment Compels Regulation of Media Ownership," *Cardozo Public Law, Policy and Ethics Journal* 4 (2006): 690.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Müller, *Comparing Mass Media in Established Democracies: Patterns of Media Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 38-40.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Trappel and Tanja Maniglio, "On Media Monitoring–The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM)," *Communications* 34, no. 2 (2009): 179.

must provide a wide range of informed opinions on pressing issues, irrespective of whether these informed opinions are held by people in positions of power.<sup>7</sup>

This is the public good the media are charged with providing, the public service the media must perform for democracy to live up to its name. While human psychology provides plenty of reasons to believe that even the freest public debate will not necessarily produce a victory for truth, democratic legitimacy requires it.<sup>8</sup> Even if the forces of prejudice and bias skew the outcome of free debates (today, debates *in the media*) they remain a *sine qua non* of democracy. Other forms of government may dispense with free public debate and retain their character, but “democracy” – *demos* (people) + *kratia* (power)<sup>9</sup> – must retain free and open debate, even if *the people* who share equally in *power* are full of psychological flaws. This public good may hardly be used to its fullest potential, or its effects may be overwhelmed or muted by other pressures – nevertheless, the requirement *for* this public good remains. Any society may either ensure that this public good is provided by its media system, or may cease pretending to be a democracy; there is no other option.

For democracies, the question is only *how* to provide the free and open public sphere democracy requires. Whether these ends are best achieved by means of the media’s absolute freedom from government, or from government regulation of the media, is beside the point. As Deng Xiaoping famously said: it does not matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice. Whatever policy, from total regulation to complete

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<sup>7</sup> Robert W. McChesney, "A Real Media Utopia," paper presented at the annual American Sociological Association conference, Denver, Colorado, August 17-20, 2012: 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Curran, *Media and Power*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Fuller, *Beasts and Gods*, 23.

deregulation, which results in a media that fulfills its democratic remit, is the policy that must be implemented.

There are arguments to be made for absolute media freedom on the one hand, and for complete regulation or government ownership of the media on the other – as well as everything in between.<sup>10</sup> A media completely independent of government would seem best equipped to provide criticism of government; however, a media completely independent of commercial pressures would seem to have its own benefits as well. Perhaps some combination of government regulation and freedom would provide the best mix, minimizing undue influence from sources of both public and private power – or the twin enemies of “pap and propaganda.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, unlike questions about the atomic mass of gold or the boiling point of water, this is a debate that science cannot definitively answer. The best science can do to decide this question is in systematically studying the variety of media systems that exist in the world today, and examining how they relate to a key requirement of democracy, an informed citizenry. This chapter will review a wide variety of efforts to do just this, to arrive at a better understanding of how we can best ensure that our aspirations to enjoy democracy are fulfilled, with substance in place of facade.

### **i. What democracy needs from its media**

*"I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome*

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<sup>10</sup> Müller, *Comparing*, 58-60.

<sup>11</sup> Garnham, *Structure of Television*, 27.

*discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power."*

- Thomas Jefferson writing to William C. Jarvis, 1820

Nearly a century ago, Walter Lippmann wrote:

The world about which each man is supposed to have opinions has become so complicated as to defy his powers of understanding. ... What men who make the study of politics a vocation cannot do, the man who has an hour a day for newspapers and talk cannot possibly hope to do. He must seize catchwords and headlines or nothing.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the world has become even more complicated, and in addition to newspapers we now have television and the internet to take up our free time and defy our powers of understanding. This being the case, what are we to make of the "informed citizen" as a requirement of democracy? Just how much information would one need to be "informed" – and can we realistically expect a media system to be able to provide it? After all, in the century before Lippmann's time, when social science was in its infancy and the accumulated knowledge of humankind was more manageable, it was quite possible for the few full citizens of contemporary democracies to be almost fully informed.<sup>13</sup> Today, one could spend an entire lifetime learning about a single country or political theory and still not know everything about it. Since it seems to be an impossibility, can an "informed

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (La Vergne TN: BN Publishing, 2012): 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> John Zaller, "A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen," *Political Communication* 20, no. 2 (2003): 114.



citizenry” really be a *requirement* for democracy? Or, what should “informed” entail, exactly?

Some media scholars have suggested that democracy can exist even with a largely uninformed citizenry and a media that does not try to provide all politically-relevant information or a broad range of debate. John Zaller has argued for a “burglar alarm” standard for the media: instead of attempting to provide a steady stream of information about all politically-relevant topics, journalists should preferentially cover issues that require urgent attention, in a focused, dramatic, and entertaining manner.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Doris Graber has argued for a “monitorial citizen” standard, in which citizens do not need to be fully informed about political issues, but instead need only to survey the political scene with enough attention to detect major threats.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, “monitorial citizens” paying attention to “burglar alarms” but remaining largely ignorant about the political realm can still fulfill the duties of democratic citizenship by using heuristics, or rules of thumb, to make voting decisions.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, even a low-information media diet can sustain a healthy democracy. Citizens merely need to pay attention when the media raises the alarm about serious threats; during normal times, citizens can simply pick up bits of information here and there that can be used to decide their votes. (For instance, hearing that a candidate is “pro-business” is not much information in itself; but even without reading the candidate’s entire political platform, with minimal information one might accurately surmise that this means the candidate wants to lower taxes, weaken unions, and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Doris Graber, “Mediated Politics and Citizenship in the Twenty-First Century,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004).

<sup>16</sup> Doris Graber, “The Media and Democracy: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, no. 1 (2003).

reduce regulation.) Even if the media does not provide a wide range of informed opinions, but only those opinions held by mainstream political figures, this is not a serious problem: after all, only those within the political mainstream have a chance of enacting their ideas into law, hence these are the ideas that citizens most need to know.<sup>17</sup> Given that our brains have limited information-processing capabilities, might this reduced standard suffice for media in a democracy?

Critics of this approach have noted that it is a very U.S.-centered perspective (making it seem like apologetics for the unusually, and historically, high levels of ignorance in the U.S. compared to Western Europe), and that information matters tremendously for political decision-making, such that even the cleverest of heuristics cannot serve as a substitute for knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Also, critics note that the “burglar alarm” or “monitorial citizen” standard is set up in opposition to a straw man: no one is arguing that all citizens should be the human equivalent of Google, able to respond to any political query with nearly all information in existence. Furthermore, the U.S. media already operates in burglar alarm mode, blaring away not only at serious threats in the political environment, but also to attract attention to sensationalistic stories about disasters, lurid reports on crime, and whatever else will generate advertising revenue. The media is not putting people to sleep with an overabundance of information; it is acting like the boy who cried wolf and losing the trust of audiences who need it when there is real political danger. Instead of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>18</sup> Toril Aalberg and James Curran, “How Media Inform Democracy: Central Debates,” in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 3-14 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 11-12.

“burglar alarm” or “monitorial citizen” standard, the media should try to approximate the “full news” ideal, covering all events and decisions that may affect quality of life.<sup>19</sup>

A great deal of research demonstrates that in the real world, heuristics cannot play the same political role as knowledge: citizens cannot reliably take shortcuts to approximate informed decisions. When asked to describe what major political parties stand for, only knowledge of hard news correlates strongly with being able to correctly identify party positions. Knowledge of soft news is *negatively* associated with the ability to correctly identify party positions.<sup>20</sup> This poses serious problems when it comes time to vote: for instance, U.S. conservatives with low levels of political knowledge believe that the Republican Party supports government regulation of the economy as much as the Democratic Party.<sup>21</sup> This one piece of inaccurate information can frustrate their casting an informed vote. A statistical analysis of political opinions and knowledge found that opinions are strongly dependent on the information one has – to the extent that if all citizens were equally well-informed about politics, one of every five policy issues would likely have a different collective preference.<sup>22</sup> Hence in a democracy, where collective preferences drive policy, a well-informed citizenry does not merely do well on trivia quizzes – they change government policy in the direction of their preferences.

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<sup>19</sup> W. Lance Bennett, "The Burglar Alarm that Just Keeps Ringing: A Response to Zaller," *Political Communication* 20, no. 2 (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Anders Todal Jenssen et al., "Informed Citizens, Media Use, and Public Knowledge of Parties' Policy Positions," in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 138-158 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 146-147.

<sup>21</sup> Jesper Strömbäck et al., "The Financial Crisis as a Global News Event: Cross-National Media Coverage and Public Knowledge of Economic Affairs," in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 159-175 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 173.

<sup>22</sup> Scott L. Althaus, "Information Effects in Collective Preferences," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 03 (1998).

Naturally, one's opinion on any given political issue involves many factors, including education, class, personal and family history, and the like. Although levels of education are a primary factor in how much political information people pick up from their media environment, TV news helps to reduce knowledge gaps between those with high and low levels of education.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the media has an independent role in promoting a knowledgeable citizenry, in addition to the educational system. The policy-specific information the media provides is particularly important in making political decisions, as a series of experiments demonstrated: even (and especially) among those with high levels of general political knowledge, exposure to policy-specific information produces a significant influence on political judgments.<sup>24</sup> Another experimental study found that the effects of education and political sophistication are greatly reduced if not eliminated by exposure to specific, highly diagnostic policy information.<sup>25</sup> Other factors like class and personal history can also be overwhelmed by a lack of information, as one study found: as a group, the highly informed held a variety of different opinions consonant with their backgrounds, while the uninformed showed little difference in opinion despite having a variety of differences in background.<sup>26</sup> In other words, without information about a policy, we are unable to turn our predispositions into dispositions – regardless of how our predispositions have been formed.

A thorough economic analysis of over 100 countries found that government performance and corruption were powerfully influenced by two key factors: the presence

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<sup>23</sup> Jerit et al., "Citizens, Knowledge."

<sup>24</sup> Gilens, "Political Ignorance."

<sup>25</sup> James H. Kuklinski et al., "The Political Environment and Citizen Competence," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* (1989): 341.

of free and regular elections, and how well-informed the citizenry is. The economists who performed the study explained that “the presence of a well-informed electorate in a democratic setting explains between one-half and two-thirds of the variance in the levels of governmental performance and corruption” – a greater effect than even a country’s level of economic development.<sup>27</sup> A subsequent study found that information effects through voting on quality of governance occur over several election cycles: a well-informed citizenry knows which policies are in their favor and which politicians are corrupt, and vote accordingly, improving the quality of government in the long run.<sup>28</sup>

Political information is probably particularly essential in the realm of foreign policy, where one’s education is less likely to provide any relevant guidance.<sup>29</sup> An experiment on support for foreign military intervention came to this very conclusion, with those exposed to specific information on the intervention expressing less support for it than the uninformed.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the experiment’s participants who had received relevant information demonstrated more stable opinions about the military intervention over time, while still adjusting their opinions as reports about the conflict trickled in.

Little wonder, then, that despite Lippmann’s recognition of the challenge of producing informed citizens in the modern age, he nonetheless retained a vigorous belief that information is essential for democracy:

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<sup>27</sup> Alicia Adserà et al., “Are You Being Served? Political Accountability and Quality of Government,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 19, no. 2 (2003): 479.

<sup>28</sup> Gabor Toka, “Citizen Information, Election Outcomes and Good Governance,” *Electoral Studies* 27, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>29</sup> Somin, “Knowledge about Ignorance,” 274-276.

<sup>30</sup> Cigdem V. Sirin, “Examining the Effects of Political Information and Intervention Stages on Public Support for Military Interventions: A Panel Experiment,” *Acta Politica* 46, no. 3 (2011): 285.

[M]en who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. The quack, the charlatan, the jingo, and the terrorist, can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information. ... The cardinal fact always is the loss of contact with objective information. Public as well as private reason depends upon it. Not what somebody says, not what somebody wishes were true, but what is so beyond all our opining, constitutes the touchstone of our sanity. And a society which lives at second-hand will commit incredible follies and countenance inconceivable brutalities if that contact is intermittent and untrustworthy.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, information does not always change opinion. Lippmann certainly would not change his after being informed of the recent U.S. experience with the second war on Iraq.

Clearly, we cannot expect any media system to produce omniscient citizens. At the same time, we know by looking around the world that a country's population can be much better informed than the U.S. population currently is. Therefore, Graber is correct that one should not view "the media through the rose-colored glasses of an ideal but quite impossible world,"<sup>32</sup> and expect more than human cognitive limitations will permit. But given the closer-to-ideal, really-existing contemporary European experience of a less commercial, more regulated, and better performing media system leading to a better-informed citizenry – no rose-colored glasses are needed. Perhaps we, as Graber observes, should not "ignore the fact that most U.S. media are commercial enterprises that must be

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<sup>31</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*," 32, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Graber, "Mediated Politics," 551.

concerned with attracting the kinds of clientele and advertisers that allow them to make substantial profits.”<sup>33</sup>

## **ii. Commercialism and its discontents**

*"The proposal of any new law or regulation which comes from [businessmen], ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it."*

– Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations*

If commercialism is a factor that tends to push media systems farther from the democratic ideal, and reduce the quality of the public good (an informed citizenry) they are charged with providing, then this is a problem that is hardly limited to the United States. Policymakers in both the U.S. and U.K. have demonstrated a primary concern with the business interests of media companies, the result of successful industry lobbying and a textbook case of regulatory capture.<sup>34</sup> In Europe generally, commercial interests have had more of an uphill battle, as European governments' initial media policies were to implement public service rather than commercial systems. However, over the past few decades Europe's media systems have been largely opened to commercial TV, and where

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Des Freedman, *The Politics of Media Policy* (New York: Polity, 2008): 78-9, 104.

once countries had only a few public service channels each, today there are nearly 9,000 available channels. Just as Markus Prior demonstrated within the U.S., Europe too is starting to evince the same “mo’ media, mo’ problems” phenomena: fewer viewers catching newscasts inadvertently, instead tuning in to one of the much more prevalent entertainment options, thereby producing greater gaps in political knowledge in some countries.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, commercialization and the reduction of subsidies in the European newspaper system are threatening papers that serve segments of society other than business, or seek to attract anything other than the broadest possible audience with a bland, uncontroversial style.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, this general trend toward commercialization of media is a truly global phenomenon.<sup>37</sup>

To some, this may seem unobjectionable, or even a praiseworthy development.<sup>38</sup> After all, the news media is an institution comprising professionals who cannot do their job without a salary, so funding for the media must come from somewhere – and where better than from the advertising market? Funding from the government could come with strings attached, jeopardizing the objectivity and neutrality of the news. The threat of government censorship would increase alongside financial reliance on government funding. Commercial funding, on the other hand, comes from hundreds and thousands of dispersed businesses, which would seemingly need an improbable degree of coordination to exert a similar censoring pressure.

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<sup>35</sup> Toril Aalberg, et al., “Media Choice and Informed Democracy: Toward Increasing News Consumption Gaps in Europe?” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>36</sup> Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 292-294.

<sup>37</sup> Kalyani Chadha and Anandam Kavoori, “Beyond the Global/Local: Examining Contemporary Media Globalization Trends across National Contexts,” in *Media and Society*, ed. James Curran, 210-229 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Brian C. Anderson and Adam D. Thierer, *A Manifesto for Media Freedom* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008).



Nevertheless, commercial funding brings its own dangers. When the First Amendment was written, printing presses were relatively cheap, and the number of active, literate citizens was roughly the same as the number of citizens who could afford to engage in publication.<sup>39</sup> Since there were no mass-circulation newspapers dominating the market, anyone's pamphlet or newsheet could compete on a more-or-less equal playing field with everyone else's. (Even personal – not yet “private” – letters could be freely quoted in colonial-era newspapers.)<sup>40</sup> Today, however, mass-circulation newspapers dominate the U.S. market, with the vast majority of U.S. cities hosting only one newspaper. Costs of entering the contemporary newspaper market are out of reach for the overwhelming majority of active, literate citizens. Broadcast television and radio are by their technological nature constrained by the scarcity of the electromagnetic spectrum – so even if cost were no object, spectrum scarcity would limit the number of entrants. While spectrum scarcity does not apply to satellite, cable, or internet television, the cost of entry in these markets is even greater than that of newspapers. Whether scarcity is caused by technological or financial limitations, the results are the same.<sup>41</sup> The scarcity produced by physical constraints is distinct from that produced by financial constraints, but in practical effects they are hardly different. The U.S. Supreme Court has held (in the case of technological scarcity, at least) that barriers to entering media markets can produce a situation of “unlimited private censorship,” as the few who do own media companies can transmit only those views they agree with while effectively censoring all others.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Lee C. Bollinger, *Uninhibited, Robust, and Wide-Open: A Free Press for a New Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 56-57.

<sup>40</sup> Peters, “Into the Air,” 165.

<sup>41</sup> Bollinger, *Uninhibited*, 54-64.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33, quoting from the *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* decision.

Unlimited private censorship has emerged as a structural feature of the modern media. As Stanley Ingber explains:

No one today seriously would argue that picketing and leafleting are as effective communication devices as newspapers and broadcasting. Access to the mass media is crucial to anyone wishing to disseminate his views widely. Nevertheless, monopolistic practices, economies of scale, and an unequal distribution of resources have made it difficult for new ventures to enter the business of mass communications. Restriction of entry to the economically advantaged quells voices today that might have been heard in the time of the town meeting and the pamphleteer. The media consequently carry great power to suggest and shape articulated thought. Media owners and managers, rather than the individuals wishing to speak, thus determine which persons, facts, and ideas shall reach the public.<sup>43</sup>

Again, the separation between government and private censorship is merely a distinction without a difference. Just as some governments can freely censor ideas contrary to their interests, so too can companies in commercialized media systems censor ideas contrary to theirs. The Spanish journalist Pascual Serrano writes:

The freedom of expression – what they call freedom of the press – should ensure that we know the complaints and contributions of groups of ecologists, union members, human rights lawyers; in sum, critical voices with something to say. Do prohibitions exist against these people making their complaints? In the majority of countries, no. However, it is the media that has the power to carry these voices to

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<sup>43</sup> Ingber, "The Marketplace," 38-39.

the citizenry. In this way, the media does not exercise the right to freedom of expression, but the right to *ensor*, in that it decides what we, the citizens, get to learn and not learn. In a true democracy, the citizen cannot remain in the palms of private media companies without any democratic participation, as currently holds.<sup>44</sup>

While the historical experience of Western countries points almost exclusively to the danger of government censorship, the current experience of China (discussed later) highlights how both government and private censorship can operate in tandem, producing what Chinese officials call “sophisticated propaganda.”<sup>45</sup> The Chinese government has consciously adopted the techniques of private censorship, shaping and controlling the media by crowding out rather than overtly censoring critical voices.<sup>46</sup>

It is essential to recognize that the advertising alternative to government funding, with its danger of government censorship, is not absolute independence, but an alternate form of dependence.<sup>47</sup> Dependence on advertising increases the danger of private censorship, at the very least muting or watering down critical reporting on business. (And in some countries, like Thailand, private media companies are used by their owners simply to increase their own political power, or even to promote particular stocks, producing

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<sup>44</sup> Serrano, “Democracia e Liberdade,” 78, translation and emphasis mine.

<sup>45</sup> Wu Guoguang describes the effect of greater commercialization or marketization in China: “As media coverage in today’s China *seems* so energetic, intensive, liberal, and open, the Chinese audience *thinks* it is fully informed about what it wants to know and, therefore, that its judgment about the world is informed. But the broadcasting is simply misleading, and propaganda works gently but even more **powerfully.**” (Guoguang, 2010, 77)

<sup>46</sup> Margaret E. Roberts and Brandon M. Stewart, “Localization and Coordination: How Propaganda and Censorship Converge in Chinese Newspapers,” paper presented at the annual New Directions in Text as Data Conference, Chicago, Illinois October 10-11, 2014: 27.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Blethen and Ryan Blethen, “The Wall Street-Based Absentee Ownership Model of Our News Is Broken,” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 194-201 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 9.

capital gains larger than the cost of running a newspaper.)<sup>48</sup> Ironically, since large media companies depend on good relations with governments to receive favorable regulation, private control of the media can produce much the same effects as government censorship. This is a curious inversion of the contemporary Chinese situation, where private censorship is enforced through the government censor – in the case of private media companies dependent on favorable regulation, government censorship can be *de facto* enforced through private censors. This interpenetration of private and government power prompted one legal scholar to argue:

Analogies to the military-industrial complex can now be found in our media industry. Large media interests control profitability through their unique political and social influence, just as armament companies have been able to control profitability through their ties to the military. Indeed, the phenomenon might be called a media-political complex. In a free society, gatekeepers and agenda setters have tremendous influence. Due to powerful gatekeeping ability and dazzling agenda-setting power, media conglomerates have an enormous potential to shape political decision in their favor, often without public awareness.<sup>49</sup>

While some libertarians may be relieved to find the insignia of a private security firm, not a national flag, on the uniform of the jack-booted thugs who break down their door – most of us would not be similarly comforted. Likewise with media censorship: what does it matter if the censor is a government employee consciously applying a propaganda strategy, or a private employee simply carrying out a business plan? In both cases, democratic citizens

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<sup>48</sup> Duncan McCargo, "Partisan Polyvalence: Characterizing the Political Role of Asian Media," In *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 201-223 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 206.

<sup>49</sup> McGuire, "Media Influence," 710-711.

deserve to have their freedom of expression defended. However, as the constitutional and communications law professor Jerome Barron notes:

If freedom of expression cannot be secured because entry into the communication media is not free but is confined as a matter of discretion by a few private hands, the sense of the justice of existing institutions, which freedom of expression is designed to assure, vanishes from some section of our population as surely as if access to the media were restricted by the government. ...The constitutional admonition against abridgment of speech and press is at present not applied to the very interests which have real power to effect such abridgment.<sup>50</sup>

The modern, commercialized press is not a free press. Although Americans take great pride in the First Amendment, it was written to provide a free press in a radically different media environment. Doris Graber rightly notes that today, the “media are not structured to perform the functions that America’s founders expected of them.”<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, the myth of a free press persists, because it is useful and necessary for politicians, provides credibility and status for journalists, and is psychologically comforting for citizens.<sup>52</sup> In light of this, Jan Oberg’s suggestion rings quite true: “Perhaps we must begin to question the concept of a free media, if the main freedoms the most influential media choose to practice are the freedom to not investigate and not to question the war

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<sup>50</sup> Jerome A. Barron "Access to the Press. A New First Amendment Right," *Harvard Law Review* (1967): 1649, 1656.

<sup>51</sup> Graber, "The Media," 147.

<sup>52</sup> W. Lance Bennett *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2009): 268-270.

system of their own society, the freedom to be as biased as they please, and the freedom not to investigate what is not officially stated.”<sup>53</sup>

Nor is this solely a U.S. problem. Variations of the problem of commercial pressures vitiating freedom of the press and freedom of expression exist to some degree in all countries with commercialized media systems. The fundamental cause of this problem is explained clearly by the Brazilian jurist Fábio Konder Comparato:

It never hurts to reiterate that the public is in opposition to the private [*viz.*, that which is owned]. The *public* is what pertains to all. The *private* is what pertains exclusively to one or some. The community or society is the exact opposite of private property. In this sense, one could say that freedom of expression, as a fundamental right, cannot possibly be the object of anyone’s property ownership, because it is an essential attribute of the human person, a right common to all. Now, if the freedom of expression is currently exercised through the necessary mediation of the mass media [the means of communicating with the masses], then these cannot, logically speaking, be the object of corporate ownership in the private interest.<sup>54</sup>

Bia Barbosa, a Brazilian journalist, elaborates on this tension:

When large media companies sell their products, they are not only selling what gives them their material sustenance, but also their conceptions of the world, their values. In the face of the power of large media companies to transmit their ideas,

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<sup>53</sup> Jan Oberg, "The Iraq Conflict and the Media: Embedded with War Rather than with Peace and Democracy," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 185-203 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 201.

<sup>54</sup> Fábio Konder Comparato, "Prefácio," in *Liberdade de Expressão x Liberdade da Imprensa: Direito à Comunicação e Democracia*, 2nd ed., by Venício A. de Lima, 11-18 (São Paulo: Publisher Brasil, 2012): 14.

which is much greater than the power of any citizen without access to the means of producing and conveying communications, the disparity in the battle of ideologies turns brutal. With this power, the monophonic media introduces an authoritarian public sphere, destroying the properly horizontal relationship of classical democracy. There are few voices talking, and a passive mass listening.<sup>55</sup>

Without the ability to *be* one of the few voices talking, or at least influencing what they say, we are practically deprived of our right to speak *to* society. If anyone proposed that we allocate speech rights through a pricing system, whereby only those who command the highest price for their speech are awarded the *right to speak*, we would consider this to be a terribly undemocratic idea. Yet this is almost precisely the current status quo in commercialized media systems – except it is worse, because the pricing market for speech is determined by its actual participants, who are advertisers, not the audience itself.<sup>56</sup> As Finnish communication scholar Kaarle Nordenstreng concludes:

Under such conditions we cannot speak of the will of the people; this is merely a reflection, an echo of the message originated by a small group of privileged individuals who exercise control over the channels of power, influence and communication. When this is the case, the so-called free market economy, which calls itself a society of free choice, is not entitled to look down on so-called totalitarian societies.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bia Barbosa, "A Comunicação como um Direito e o Espaço Público Midiático," in *Em Defesa de uma Opinião Pública Democrática*, ed. Venício A. de Lima et al., 197-215 (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014): 205, translation mine.

<sup>56</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech* (New York: Free Press, 1995): 57-58.

<sup>57</sup> Clifford Christians and Kaarle Nordenstreng, "Social Responsibility Worldwide," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19, no. 1 (2004): 5.

This is a more delicate formulation of Dahl's conjecture that a system in which elites can plug in their preferences to get what they want out of it, even if it be called a democracy, is functionally equivalent to totalitarianism. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the way media and minds interact does not allow for inputs producing predictable outputs; but it does allow for *blocking* certain inputs that can *prevent* certain outputs. There may be no direct functional equivalence, but those who would cast the first stone at totalitarians should check first to see if their own house is made of glass.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the fundamental, philosophical tension between commercialized mass media and freedom of expression, there are concrete, practical deficiencies in how well the commercial media transmits important political information. While these deficiencies will be discussed in detail later, for now it is important to note that more commercialized media systems are particularly threatening for younger generations around the world, who disproportionately ignore highly-informative programming and opt for entertainment instead.<sup>59</sup> And even highly-informative, hard news programming has been observed to be turning softer and less informative under the pressure of commercialization.<sup>60</sup> Coverage of government actions tends to focus on "human impact" anecdotes in lieu of serious analysis of policies' content and consequences, and more time is devoted to "news" about the entertainment industry.<sup>61</sup> Visuals in TV news come to be used less to convey information,

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<sup>58</sup> That being said, it is debatable whether even elites in totalitarian societies can "plug in" their preferences to get precisely the outputs they want. If "plugging in" through a propaganda system were so direct and unproblematic, totalitarian governments would hardly need such powerful secret police.

<sup>59</sup> Lance W. Bennett, "Changing Societies, Changing Media Systems: Challenges for Communication Theory, Research and Education," in *Can the Media Serve Democracy? Essays in Honour of Jay G. Blumler*, ed. Stephen Coleman et al., 151-163 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 154.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Cushion, *The Democratic Value of News: Why Public Service Media Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 68.

<sup>61</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 59.



and more to simply promote and legitimize the newscast itself.<sup>62</sup> While the use of vapid, largely information-free “image bites” is common to the media systems of the U.S. and Europe, their use on commercial as opposed to public stations is more widespread.<sup>63</sup>

Even the internet, which many hope to be the *deus ex machina* generating a happy ending after all of these troubling developments, the savior that overcomes all problems of government and private censorship, is clearly not (yet) up to the task. First of all, most netizens’ entry point to the internet is Google, whose algorithm favors news outlets with scale and established brand presence.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, journalism on the internet comes predominantly from existing newspaper and TV news companies,<sup>65</sup> and links to their websites exhibit a power law distribution: “the rich get richer” as more people link to well-established news websites, drawing more traffic and leading to still further links driving still more traffic.<sup>66</sup> To maximize ad revenue by keeping more internet surfers within their own websites, commercial news sites tend to provide far fewer external links to other sites, compared to the websites of public service media.<sup>67</sup> This is a glaring waste of potential, since the greatest benefit of the internet is its breadth and depth of diverse information sources. Hyperlinks to external websites could and should be used to allow readers to independently fact-check news articles.

Given the evidence, it is hard to dispute Natalie Fenton’s conclusion that “[r]elying on fully commercial enterprises for the deliverance of news and current affairs journalism

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Griffin, "Looking at TV News: Strategies for Research," *Communication* 13, no. 2 (1992): 139.

<sup>63</sup> Frank Esser, "Dimensions of Political News Cultures: Sound Bite and Image Bite News in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 4 (2008): 419.

<sup>64</sup> Justin Schlosberg, *Media Ownership and Agenda Control* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 122.

<sup>65</sup> McGuire, "Media Influence," 716.

<sup>66</sup> Katherine Ognyanova and Peter Monge, "A Multitheoretical, Multilevel, Multidimensional Network Model of the Media System: Production, Content, and Audiences," *Communication Yearbook* 37 (2013): 16.

<sup>67</sup> Tsan-Kuo Chang et al., "Open Global Networks, Closed International Flows World System and Political Economy of Hyperlinks in Cyberspace," *International Communication Gazette* 71, no. 3 (2009).

that purports to be for the public good and in the public interest has failed.”<sup>68</sup> Our historically-understandable but dangerously myopic focus on the danger of *government* censorship has distracted us from the equally threatening danger of private censorship. Whatever the source of restrictions on information, opinions, and arguments in the media, the effects are just as deleterious. As Edmund Burke warned, we would be wise to treat both forms of censorship the same, regardless of the words we use to describe them: Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear. Otherwise you will be wise historically, a fool in practice. ... You are terrifying yourselves with ghosts and apparitions, whilst your house is the haunt of robbers.<sup>69</sup>

### **iii. Commercialism does not guarantee pluralism**

*"Like a ghost - but this time from the future - I tried to explain to the press club what it is they do that they don't know they do. I quote, yet again, David Hume: The Few are able to control the Many only through Opinion. In the eighteenth century, Opinion was dispensed from pulpit and schoolroom. Now the media are in place to give us Opinion that has been manufactured in the boardrooms of those corporations – once national, now international – that control our lives. ... Naturally, this sounded to my audience like the old conspiracy theory. Later, I was asked if I actually thought that Kay Graham and Larry Tisch really told the news departments of The Washington Post and CBS what to tell us. I said, Yes, of course, they do on occasion, but*

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<sup>68</sup> Natalie Fenton, "Deregulation or Democracy? New Media, News, Neoliberalism and the Public Interest," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 01 (2011): 70.

<sup>69</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution, Vol. XXIV, Part 3* (New York: PF Collier & Son, 1909–14): 242.

*in everyday practice they don't need to give instructions because everyone who works for them thinks exactly alike on those economic issues that truly matter."*

- Gore Vidal, "Time for a People's Convention"

Once it is recognized how "private censorship" can exist within a commercialized media system, it is easier to see why the commercial media fails to provide the kind of pluralistic debate required for democracy. Media companies are often conceived of as vendors in a marketplace of ideas, a metaphor which implies the same diversity of perspectives as there is a diversity of goods offered in a thriving market. But a marketplace does not necessarily entail diversity. Unfortunately, as media economist Wayne Fu points out, "[v]iews that market operation can promote social objectives are plagued by ignorance about the viability of the presumed causal link between market structure and these prescribed performances."<sup>70</sup> While there are bazaars, street markets, and mega-malls that sell every imaginable item, there are also commissaries, company stores, and government-operated shops selling a frustratingly limited set of wares. Hence the provision of diversity is a question not of *whether* a market exists, but what *kind* of market exists.

The degree of pluralism of a commercial media marketplace is not the direct result of the degree of concentration within the market. This point can be confused by indexes of media diversity which merely count the *number* of media outlets rather than the diversity of their contents and viewpoints.<sup>71</sup> While a large number of media outlets may *incidentally* provide pluralism, it is a concept distinct from such measures. Even a perfect media

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<sup>70</sup> Wayne Fu, "Applying the Structure-Conduct-Performance Framework in the Media Industry Analysis," *International Journal on Media Management* 5, no. 4 (2003): 275.

<sup>71</sup> Freedman, *The Politics*, 219.

monopolist would feel commercial pressure to differentiate its products to capture all niches in the market; and in a perfectly competitive market with countless media outlets, the competition to attract the most desirable audience segments could lead to little more than a profusion of derivative, copycat products.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the intense competition in a highly populated media market might make it less likely that any outlet will take on costly investigative reporting, investigations, and analyses, or try out any risky innovations.<sup>73</sup> There is, however, currently no economic consensus on precisely how market concentration affects competition.<sup>74</sup>

Neither is pluralism coterminous with press freedom or democratic governance. As one study of 9/11 coverage found, media presentations in *less* democratic countries were actually more pluralistic, offering wider, more diverse interpretations, than those in more democratic countries.<sup>75</sup> Of course, there are other reasons besides media pluralism to support press freedom, democratic governance, and an unconcentrated, open news media market. The point here is simply that these may help, or they may even be necessary, but they are not *sufficient* on their own.

There are good reasons to believe that an open and competitive market will produce diversity in the overall content provided by media companies, but there is less reason to believe that this diversity will extend to the political opinions and perspectives offered.<sup>76</sup> The media market produces competitive pressure for widely-attractive contents with high

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<sup>72</sup> McGuire, "Media Influence," 717-718.

<sup>73</sup> Marina Popescu and Gabor Tóka, "Public Television, Private Television and Citizens' Political Knowledge," *EUI Working Papers RSCAS* 66 (2009): 6.

<sup>74</sup> Fu, "Applying," 278.

<sup>75</sup> Joshua Woods, "Democracy and the Press: A Comparative Analysis of Pluralism in the International Print Media," *The Social Science Journal* 44, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>76</sup> Michele Polo, "Regulation for Pluralism in the Media Markets," in *The Economic Regulation of Broadcasting Markets: Evolving Technology and the Challenges for Policy*, ed. Paul Seabright and Jürgen von Hagen, 150-188 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

fixed costs, favoring duplication and economies of scale in place of myriad differentiated products. This makes a commercial media system less likely to exhibit *external* diversity, where each outlet may have an ideological bent but the market on the whole represents the full spectrum of ideological diversity. Nor are market mechanisms likely to produce ideological diversity *internal* to a given outlet. While many basketball fans may also appreciate football and tennis, there are far fewer socialists who also appreciate monarchy and fascism, or conservatives who also appreciate anarchism and communism. A media company seeking to attract basketball fans can also provide coverage of football and tennis without losing its target audience – however, a media company seeking to attract socialists or conservatives may well lose its target audience if it also provides perspectives from vastly different political outlooks. Additionally, large media companies require a good relationship with government to receive broadcast license renewals and favorable regulation, fueling a bias in favor of major political parties.

A lack of pluralism in the media can be produced not only by commercial pressures, but as discussed earlier, by journalistic culture or professionalism as well. This has been called a “regime of objectivity,” and it is typified by a reliance on official sources whose views are only challenged if a separate official source can be found with contrary views.<sup>77</sup> This produces unintended ideological consequences, usually in a conservative or status quo-maintaining direction. Nelson Rodrigues, a Brazilian writer and journalist, called those following this sort of journalistic professionalism “objectivity idiots” for their inability to exercise independent judgment.<sup>78</sup> Such invective is understandable when the consequences

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Hackett and William Carroll, *Remaking Media: The Struggle to Democratize Public Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 34.

<sup>78</sup> Afonso de Albuquerque, “Another ‘Fourth Branch’: Press and Political Culture in Brazil,” *Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2005): 494.

of this variety of journalistic professionalism are considered. As the columnist Molly Ivins argued:

There is no such thing as objectivity, and the truth, that slippery little bugger, has the oddest habit of being way to hell off on one side or the other: it seldom nestles neatly half-way between any two opposing points of view. ... [M]ost stories aren't two-sided, they're seventeen-sided at least. In the second place, it's of no help to either the readers or the truth to quote one side saying, 'Cat,' and the other side saying, 'Dog,' while the truth is there's an elephant crashing around out there in the bushes.<sup>79</sup>

The regime of objectivity is particularly dangerous when political elites are largely in agreement on a given issue; when this occurs, an "objectivity idiot" would refuse to seriously question the elite consensus for lack of opposing "official sources" to quote, and out of fear of being labeled "ideological" or "unprofessional."<sup>80</sup> Such fear may be justified; Walter Lippmann explained that "the reporter, if he is to earn his living, must nurse his personal contacts with the eye-witnesses and privileged informants. If he is openly hostile to those in authority, he will cease to be a reporter unless there is an opposition party in the inner circle who can feed him news. Failing that, he will know precious little of what is going on."<sup>81</sup> As understandable as this behavior may be, it amounts to a serious form of intellectual corruption, whereby journalists refuse to provide a check on government and

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<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Chris Hedges, "The Disease of Objectivity," in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 209-213 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 209.

<sup>80</sup> McChesney, "A Real Media," 8.

<sup>81</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*, 25.

act as a mere extension of it, legitimizing their negligence by appeal to professional conventions.<sup>82</sup>

Thankfully, this regime of objectivity does not rule everywhere, and not all journalism cultures are populated by objectivity idiots, despite evidence of a growing, global culture of journalism.<sup>83</sup> (And even in the U.S., objectivity-idiocy may be on the wane.)<sup>84</sup> The culture of journalism in the U.S. seems to be more affected than in Europe,<sup>85</sup> with German journalists in particular believing that their role is to provide *interpretation* of what official sources say, to get at the truth behind their presumably biased statements.<sup>86</sup> There is also some evidence that a form of the regime of objectivity has spread to parts of Asia.<sup>87</sup> A study of journalists working in 18 countries found that those working for corporate media outlets were less likely to take either a strong objectivist or interpretationist stance, compared to those working for public media.<sup>88</sup> Most revealingly, a survey of journalists from 28 countries found that when asked to blame one factor for the media's failure to live up to its public service role, the most common answer was journalistic conventions – in other words, their professional culture.<sup>89</sup> Thankfully, alongside the development of a flawed global journalism culture, there is evidence that a

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<sup>82</sup> Christians and Nordenstreng, "Social Responsibility," 17.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Hanitzsch et al., "Mapping Journalism Cultures across Nations: A Comparative Study of 18 Countries," *Journalism Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* at 287.

<sup>85</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media*, 226.

<sup>86</sup> Wolfgang Donsbach and Bettina Klett, "Subjective Objectivity: How Journalists in Four Countries Define a Key Term of Their Profession," *International Communication Gazette* 51, no. 1 (1993): 66-67.

<sup>87</sup> McCargo, "Partisan Polyvalence," 209-210.

<sup>88</sup> Yigal Godler and Zvi Reich, "How Journalists Think about Facts: Theorizing the Social Conditions behind Epistemological Beliefs," *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>89</sup> Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, "Peace Journalism: A Global Dialog for Democracy and Democratic Media," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 269-288 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 279.

global culture of critical media consumption is emerging, which might help mitigate the impact of deficient media systems.<sup>90</sup>

Whether caused by deficiencies in media markets, a flawed conception of what professional journalism should be, or some combination of the two, the conclusion remains that commercialized media systems are failing to provide the pluralism of opinions and perspectives that democracy requires. And as Venício de Lima notes, “[w]ithout a media functioning within a ‘polycentric structure’ that provides a public debate where all voices are heard, one cannot speak of freedom of the press as the guarantor of democracy.”<sup>91</sup> To find out what sort of media system *is* capable of providing the pluralism democracy requires, we will need to look more closely at the variety of media systems in the world today.

#### **iv. Three media system models**

One of the best recent attempts to provide a framework for understanding the variety of media systems around the world is Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s three models of media and politics. Their models were designed to cover only North America (excluding Mexico) and Western Europe, but they provide a good starting point for future extensions covering the rest of the world’s media systems.

The main features of countries fitting the Mediterranean or *Polarized Pluralist Model* (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France) are: an elite-oriented press with low circulation; the historically late development of freedom of the press and commercial media;

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<sup>90</sup> Anandam P. Kavoori, "Discursive Texts, Reflexive Audiences: Global Trends in Television News Texts and Audience Reception," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 43, no. 3 (1999).

<sup>91</sup> Venício A. de Lima, *Liberdade de Expressão x Liberdade da Imprensa: Direito à Comunicação e Democracia*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Publisher Brasil, 2012): 42.



dominance of electronic forms of media; “political parallelism,” whereby media outlets tend to take partisan stances and identify with a political party; public broadcasting which tends to be directed by the government or parliament; professional journalism being conceived less according to the regime of objectivity and more as a form of political activism; and the media system has recently been transitioning rapidly to commercialism, or experiencing “savage deregulation.”<sup>92</sup> The countries typified by the North/Central European or *Democratic Corporatist Model* (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland) are characterized by: a mix of partisan or interpretationist and neutral or information-oriented journalism; the historically early development of press freedom and newspapers catering to political parties and other organized social groups, which persist alongside a purely commercial press; very high newspaper circulation; a high degree of journalistic professionalism and formal organization; public broadcasting which tends to be more autonomous from government but with parties and social organizations involved in governance; and the trend toward commercialization has been balanced by the persistence of a strong public service media.<sup>93</sup> The characteristics of media systems in the North Atlantic or *Liberal Model* (Ireland, Canada, United States, United Kingdom) are: a historically early development of press freedom and high newspaper circulation, although today circulation rates are lower than the Democratic Corporatist countries; low levels of political parallelism and a high degree of commercialism; a high degree of journalistic professionalism, though less organized than the Democratic Corporatist countries; and a weak regulatory role for the government.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media*, 73-74.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

The Polarized Pluralist countries share certain historical similarities of relevance for their contemporary media systems. With the exception of France, these countries had relatively low literacy rates until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which retarded the emergence of mass-circulation newspapers. Instead, radio (and then television) was the first mass media to develop, and the electronic media continues to provide the primary source of news.<sup>95</sup> Today, public television is heavily influenced by political parties, with countries like France and Italy instituting formal systems to give parties equal access.<sup>96</sup> Journalists in Polarized Pluralist systems have attempted to win greater independence from media proprietors, with limited success; however, their levels of autonomy are still lower than in other systems.<sup>97</sup> Newspapers, particularly economically-marginal papers advocating a certain political perspective, enjoy relatively high levels of state subsidies to ensure external diversity and a pluralistic public debate.<sup>98</sup> The historically wide range of political ideologies in these countries, from royalism to communism, has been a boon to the partisan press and an impediment to the development of media independent from politics.<sup>99</sup> The frequency of legal proceedings against media owners in Southern Europe, and the ease with which governments can use selective enforcement of tax laws and other regulations against media companies has further reduced the media's independence from politics.<sup>100</sup> Recently, the Polarized Pluralist countries (with the exception of France) have been hit with "savage

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 93, 97.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 115-118.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 137.

deregulation,” provoking a “commercial deluge” more sudden and with fewer restraints than in Northern Europe.<sup>101</sup>

The Democratic Corporatist countries (and Britain) pioneered the tenets of press freedom, led by publications linked to political and religious struggles, as well as incipient merchant capitalism.<sup>102</sup> The historically early victory of liberal capitalism over feudalism, and Protestantism over Catholicism, led to the development of a broad, literate middle class which formed the large market supporting high-circulation newspapers.<sup>103</sup> The historical weakness of the Right and the landed aristocracy in Northern Europe left these forces unable to resist pressure from the Left, merchants, and the independent peasantry for liberal institutions like the free press.<sup>104</sup> The development of Protestantism, which required a certain mastery of critical debate about religious beliefs and supported a culture of reading, reasoning, and defending ideas, helped to spread this culture to the political sphere.<sup>105</sup> Today, the Democratic Corporatist model is typified by a balance between pure market forces and democratic-socialist planning.<sup>106</sup> Countries with Democratic Corporatist media systems (with the exception of Switzerland and Germany) use direct subsidies to support the press, and all of them use a variety of indirect subsidies to support different forms of media.<sup>107</sup> These subsidies have helped to reduce the effects of the global trend toward commercialism in Northern Europe.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>106</sup> Anker Brink Lund, “Media Markets in Scandinavia: Political Economy Aspects of Convergence and Divergence,” *Nordicom Review*, 28 (2007): 128.

<sup>107</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media*, 161.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 162.

Like the Democratic Corporatist countries, the media systems of the Liberal countries also benefitted from the early development of liberal capitalism and Protestantism, leading to an early expansion of literacy and a large newspaper market.<sup>109</sup> Commercialized journalism first developed here, although from the beginning the commercial media was dependent upon indirect state subsidies, and it was never completely independent of political parties and business interests.<sup>110</sup> Although an adversarial attitude toward government was a founding aspect of journalistic culture in the Liberal countries, ironically these countries also feature a strongly institutionalized relationship between government officials and journalists, along with the idea that the production of news itself should be structured around the information and interpretations provided by government officials.<sup>111</sup> “As a result of these relationships, news content is powerfully shaped by information, agendas, and interpretive frameworks originating within the institutions of the state.”<sup>112</sup> This facet of the Liberal countries may be related to the status of Britain and the U.S. as world powers: the fact that these states have more to lose from a vigorously independent news media could create structural pressure to restrain it.<sup>113</sup> As opposed to Democratic Corporatist and Polarized Pluralist systems, public television in the Liberal countries is separated from political parties and managed by neutral, independent professionals.<sup>114</sup> The historical dominance of liberalism in these countries meant that a diverse array of ideological divisions did not have the opportunity to develop; socialism, for instance, arose in opposition both feudalism and capitalism, so it

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 202-206.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 235.

did not spread as widely in countries like the U.S. without experience with feudalism, or in the other Liberal countries where liberalism became dominant early on.<sup>115</sup> Although the Liberal media system has become something of a model for countries worldwide, it is heavily criticized within the Liberal countries, it is less trusted than the media systems of continental Europe, and its rates of newspaper circulation are lower than those of the Democratic Corporatist system.<sup>116</sup>

Other media scholars have attempted to extend Hallin and Mancini's typology beyond North America and Western Europe. For instance, Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska has placed Poland's media system in between the Polarized Pluralist and Liberal models. Poland shares a low level of newspaper circulation and a variety of partisan papers in common with the Polarized Pluralist countries, and a wide variety of tabloid and free newspapers with the Liberal countries.<sup>117</sup> Unusually, the leading private TV news channel offers more information and news than both Poland's own public television and the private networks of neighboring countries.<sup>118</sup> Public TV and radio have visibly favored the ruling party since Poland's transition from communism, while the commercial media has demonstrated a greater degree of independence from government.<sup>119</sup> However, while the Polish-owned commercial media does not tend to toe any particular party's line, it clearly reflects its owners' political ideologies; foreign-owned private media companies tend to be more neutral.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>117</sup> Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska, "Italianization (or Mediterraneanization) of the Polish Media System? Reality and Perspective," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 26-50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 31.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

In the nearby Baltic countries, elements of all three media systems can be found.<sup>121</sup> As in the Polarized Pluralist model, newspaper circulation is low, journalistic professionalism developed late, and patterns of clientelism and instrumentalization of the media are apparent. Similar to the Democratic Corporatist model, the Baltic states feature institutionalized systems of media self-regulation with political and ideological independence. And as in the Liberal model, Baltic media is highly commercialized and profit-driven, with only a weak public service media sector. In Lithuania, for instance, it is not uncommon for businesses to bribe media outlets to suppress negative publicity or promote positive material.<sup>122</sup> Professional autonomy for journalists is threatened by the fear of losing one's job, which can occur in retaliation for publishing negative information about major advertisers, for instance.<sup>123</sup>

In Western Asia or the Middle East, national television systems have become overshadowed by pan-Arab satellite channels like Qatar's Al-Jazeera. The primary players in pan-Arab satellite TV are Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, with Saudi moguls providing the financing and Lebanese journalists, producers, and managers creating the content.<sup>124</sup> Saudi Arabia is the most important advertising market in the Arab world, and its own broadcast system is directly controlled by the government, while Lebanon has only a small advertising market, and its media system – along with the Saudi-financed pan-Arab satellite television system – is closest to the Polarized Pluralist model.<sup>125</sup> The ideological spectrum

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<sup>121</sup> Auksė Balčytienė, "Culture as a Guide in Theoretical Explorations of Baltic Media," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 51-71 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 69-70.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>124</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, "The Rise of Transnational Media Systems: Implications of Pan-Arab Media for Comparative Research," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 177-200 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 178-179.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-185.

represented by pan-Arab satellite television follows the division between liberals and conservatives in Saudi Arabia. Thus, not only does Saudi Arabia's rich advertising market skew media content toward Saudi preferences, but its financial control of satellite channels allows them to be instrumentalized for Saudi political purposes.<sup>126</sup> Lebanese journalists have traditionally enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy than their Saudi counterparts, but Saudi funding exerts a controlling influence.<sup>127</sup>

However, to some extent these models, which were developed from studies of North American and Western European systems, cannot be easily applied to the systems of the rest of the world.<sup>128</sup> Before looking in greater depth at other media systems around the world, let us first look at how well Hallin and Mancini's models apply to the available empirical data.

#### **v. Testing the three models of media systems**

Lisa Müller has made an impressive attempt to quantify key components of the three media models and measure 47 countries' performance according to these components.<sup>129</sup> First, she splits indicators between those measuring features of structure, and those measuring content. The *structural* features include "access to information" (newspaper circulation, radio and TV sets per capita, and the number of computers and internet users as a percentage of the population), "quantitative diversity" (the number of

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 189-191.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 194-198.

<sup>128</sup> See, e.g., Afonso de Albuquerque, "On Models and Margins: Comparative Media Models Viewed from a Brazilian Perspective," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 72-90 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Katrin Voltmer and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, "New Democracies without Citizens? Mass Media and Democratic Orientations – A Four-Country Comparison," in *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies*, ed. Katrin Voltmer, 226-250 (New York: Psychology Press, 2006).

<sup>129</sup> Müller, *Comparing Mass Media*.

newspaper titles, newspaper imports as a percentage of GDP, number of TV stations, and percentage of households receiving foreign or international channels), and “qualitative diversity” (the ideological balance of politically-aligned newspapers, the share of politically-neutral newspapers’ circulation, and the strength of the public broadcaster).<sup>130</sup> The *content* features include “amount of critical political information” (share of newspaper articles on politics, and share of articles on the government and parliament mentioning malpractice), “balance of political information” (balance of coverage of the various constitutional branches and public administration), and “platform for diverse interests” (equality in mentions of political parties, *vote-proportional* frequency in mentions of political parties, share of articles mentioning more than one party, and average number of parties mentioned per article).<sup>131</sup> These are concepts only partially encompassed by the measurements used to grasp them, but they provide a good first approximation.

Concerning structural features, Western and Central European media systems like those of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland perform best for all three dimensions overall. The Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as Japan, perform particularly well on the “access to information” dimension, while small European countries like Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Switzerland perform well in “quantitative diversity.” For “qualitative diversity,” a broader array of countries performs well, including France, Finland, India, and Israel.<sup>132</sup> In terms of content, Müller faced significant data limitations, cutting her analysis to newspapers in ten countries. Within this limited sample and reduced scope, Liberal media systems do best in terms of “amount of critical political information,” while

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 106.



Democratic Corporatist countries do fairly well on the “balance of political information” dimension while truly shining in terms of providing a “platform for diverse interests.”<sup>133</sup> Overall, Müller’s empirical analysis provided some support for Hallin and Mancini’s typologies on the structural level, but differed significantly on the content level.<sup>134</sup>

More interesting than how well theory fits empirical data, however, are the real-world effects of the various structural and content-based features of different media systems. Access to information<sup>135</sup> is correlated strongly with political participation, and to a lesser degree, so is quantitative diversity.<sup>136</sup> *Equality* of political participation was not significantly affected by any of the three structural measures, after accounting for interest in politics. (Though interest in politics may well be a partial product of qualitative and quantitative diversity in the abstract, beyond their data-limited measurements.) How well the political views of representatives match those of the citizenry, and the inclusion of minority groups in government, are both positively correlated with all three structural media system measurements: access to information, quantitative diversity, and qualitative diversity.<sup>137</sup> (Qualitative diversity exerts a positive effect on adequacy of representation over time, as citizens are exposed to a broad variety of perspectives and slowly develop their own.)<sup>138</sup> Corruption is negatively related, and the strength of political and public interest group organization is positively related, to access to information and quantitative

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 106-108, 154-155.

<sup>135</sup> However, when the United States (an outlier in terms of having high scores on the “access to information” measurement but low levels of political participation) is included in the analysis, the overall effect of access to information on political participation drops by 15% – and this in a sample of 24 countries. (Lisa Müller, email message to author, May 15, 2015)

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 182, 187.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 197, 203.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 200.

diversity.<sup>139</sup> Müller's analysis reveals that structural features of media systems clearly exert significant influence on democratic functioning. The closer media systems come to the democratic ideal of providing ample and diverse political information and opinions, the closer society comes to the democratic ideal of an active citizenry engaging in responsible self-government.

#### **vi. Around the world**

*"A person endowed with valuable personal merits would rather understand the defects of his own nation, and keep them constantly and clearly before his own eyes. But that poor wretch who has nothing in the world of which he can be proud, will always seize upon the crudest basis for pride, the nation to which he belongs. In so doing he commits himself to defend all the failings and foolishness which characterize it with his every word and deed."*

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *Aphorisms*

Before examining other studies into the relationship between different media systems and their effects on democratic functioning, it may be revealing to take a theory-free look at a broader sample of media systems around the world. Outside of North America and Europe, media systems are less likely to neatly fall into any one of Hallin and Mancini's typologies. There may be other typologies to develop and apply in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, but there is a lack of broad theoretical and large-scale empirical analysis in this area. Some proposals have been put forward, like the "state incorporation" model inspired by Taiwan and South Korea's pre-democratization experience, where the

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 189, 192-196.

government uses a mix of repression and cooptation to control media companies and their wealthy owners,<sup>140</sup> or a model for the media in authoritarian regimes, where even journalists committed to the official ideology could be sanctioned for upsetting local officials.<sup>141</sup> Any media system model for nondemocratic countries would likely need to be at least as differentiated as Hallin and Mancini's, and take historical and economic factors into account – for example, nondemocratic countries with oil wealth tend to exhibit significantly less media freedom than nondemocratic countries without the so-called resource curse.<sup>142</sup> However, dividing the world's countries into neatly separated media system models is a significant challenge for many reasons, including the hard-to-measure gap between *de jure* media regulations and their actual enforcement.<sup>143</sup> Regardless of the challenges involved, research into different nations' media systems should continue. Despite some trends toward media globalization, they remain relatively minor<sup>144</sup> – national media systems are still relatively distinct, and their differences matter.

## **Africa**

Africa's immense size, large population, and 54 diverse countries make it difficult to analyze, particularly with regard to the relationship between media systems and political structure. African countries do share some key similarities, however, beginning with their colonial histories. The European colonial powers brought radio broadcasting to their

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<sup>140</sup> Joseph Man Chan, "Media, Democracy and Globalisation: A Comparative Framework," *Javnost-The Public* 8, no. 4 (2001): 40.

<sup>141</sup> Colin Sparks, "Civil Society as Contested Concept: Media and Political Transformation in Eastern and Central Europe," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 37-56 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 38.

<sup>142</sup> Georgy Egorov et al., "Why Resource-Poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 04 (2009).

<sup>143</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 29.

<sup>144</sup> Kai Hafez, *The Myth of Media Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007): 57-64.

African possessions to advance their imperial interests, with the British introducing a variant of their public service model and the French implementing a more centralized system conducive to official manipulation.<sup>145</sup> As Africans succeeded in overthrowing European colonialism and establishing their own governments, control over radio passed from colonial administrations to the newly-independent governments. These governments by and large used radio as tools of development, controlling their content in alignment with government policies.<sup>146</sup> The immense power of the media was hardly questioned by African governments, who ignored the “minimal effects” school of media research to such an extent that many governments guarded radio stations with heavily armed soldiers to prevent their takeover by rebellious troops or activists.<sup>147</sup> Today, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, radio remains the dominant form of news media, as radio sets are cheaper than televisions and do not require literacy.

Although Western governments and NGOs have been urging for deregulated, commercialized media systems in Africa, most African governments have been reluctant to give up their public service media entirely even as they have partially opened markets to commercial media companies. As Arthur-Martins Aginam explains, “the idea of a completely market-driven media never washed with African governments after they learned from colonial times that the control of the media, particularly broadcasting, is the beginning of political wisdom.”<sup>148</sup> Nonetheless, commercialization has proceeded apace,

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<sup>145</sup> Arthur-Martins Aginam, “Media in ‘Globalizing’ Africa: What Prospect for Democratic Communication?” in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 121-142 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 125.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 126; Goretti Linda Nassanga, “An Assessment of the Changing Community Media Parameters in East Africa,” *Ecquid Novi* 30, no. 1 (2009): 47.

<sup>147</sup> Aginam, “Media in ‘Globalizing’,” 127.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

and contrary to the assumptions of Western governments and NGOs, the liberalization of media markets may have simply replaced monopolistic government control with monopolistic commercial control – and often, those who own media companies are the same people who control the government.<sup>149</sup> While the advocates of commercialization believed that it would produce media pluralism, open markets have produced monopolies that have limited the number of voices and perspectives on the airwaves.<sup>150</sup>

Unfortunately, many African governments have used their control over the media to muzzle critical journalism, and commercial media outlets have allowed for a greater airing of ethnic, regional, and religious disputes, sometimes leading to the outbreak of violence.<sup>151</sup> (In this manner, commercial media outlets are unwittingly carrying on the legacy of European colonialism, which first used ethnic distinctions as a key part of the divide-and-rule strategy.)<sup>152</sup> However, even state media outlets have been used to provoke conflict, as occurred most infamously in Rwanda.<sup>153</sup> Corruption in the media is also a problem since journalists in most African countries are poorly paid, making it harder for them to turn down a bribe to influence coverage.<sup>154</sup> Given the problems with both forms of media, it is perhaps unsurprising that over two-thirds of respondents in a survey of 16 African countries expressed the same level of trust for private and government media (although more educated respondents put more trust in private media).<sup>155</sup> In separate surveys, a

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<sup>149</sup> Yusuf Kalyango Jr, *African Media and Democratization* (Cambridge MA: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011): 120.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>151</sup> Katrin Voltmer, "How Far Can Media Systems Travel? Applying Hallin and Mancini's Comparative Framework outside the Western World," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 224-245 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 238.

<sup>152</sup> Kalyango, Jr., *African Media*, 24-25, 29.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15, 38-39.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-130.

<sup>155</sup> Devra C. Moehler and Naunihal Singh, "Whose News Do You Trust? Explaining Trust in Private Versus Public Media in Africa," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2009).

majority of respondents from East African Community countries and half of respondents from Southern African Development Community countries held unfavorable opinions about trustworthiness of their media systems overall.<sup>156</sup>

The precise mix of public service and commercial media varies by country, though some general models can be identified. One media system that is prevalent throughout Africa is typified by the example of Nigeria, where the British-established Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation has since passed under the direct control of the Ministry of Information. Although it is governed by laws with lofty public service goals, it enjoys no institutional independence from the government and largely serves as its mouthpiece.<sup>157</sup> Nigeria has opened its broadcasting sector to private companies, but these are limited to niche markets serving small, local audiences. Additionally, the radio licenses that are issued often go only to those private companies allied with the government: “a case of many stations with the same voice – that of the licensor.”<sup>158</sup> Another variant of the mixed public-private model is that of South Africa, which shares many features in common with the Nigerian model, except that its public broadcaster enjoys a somewhat higher degree of independence. However, a lack of sufficient, stable funding unaffected by government whim is threatening the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s independence, and signaling a return to the blatant partisanship of its apartheid-era past.<sup>159</sup> Public service media’s lack of independence from government, and other related deficiencies in media freedom, are a problem in many other African countries as well.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Kalyango, Jr., *African Media*, 211-212.

<sup>157</sup> Aginam, “Media in ‘Globalizing,’” 129.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132; Kalyango, Jr., *African Media*, 104-105.

<sup>160</sup> Kalyango, Jr., *African Media*, 112-115.

Besides private and public media, “community media” have recently entered many African media systems with funding from UNESCO and various NGOs. Community media do not constitute a media system in themselves, in that they are not the dominant form of media in any country, but they are a positive component. Although community media stations endure a tenuous financial existence and limited reach, they are pioneering a new form of participatory media in Africa and slowly building a truly democratic public sphere.<sup>161</sup> Their sources of funding and the potential for government interference, however, are matters of concern for the future.<sup>162</sup>

The structural features of African countries’ media systems have been shown to impact political outcomes. For example, the Ugandan media – characterized by a close relationship between media owners and government officials – failed to influence the population to block a 2006 presidential bid to eliminate term limits.<sup>163</sup> The next year, however, the Nigerian media – a substantial part of which is owned by politicians in opposition to the governing party – influenced public opinion sufficiently for the population to reject a similar presidential bid to eliminate term limits. Also, survey data from countries in the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community reveal that their respective media systems significantly influence public opinion on issues of regime legitimacy.<sup>164</sup>

Overall, the media systems of African countries demonstrate the threats to a truly democratic public sphere posed by both government and private media. Far from being a

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<sup>161</sup> Nassanga, “An Assessment.”

<sup>162</sup> Kalyango, Jr., *African Media*, 120.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-153.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

solution to the problem of government-dominated media, commercialized media systems have simply introduced a new variant of the same problem. As Aginam explains:

It would seem that the idea of democratic public communication is somewhat alien to Africa's political experience. The mass media in Africa has always been exploited by the state in the service of domination. Now with the growing influence of capital, the worst- and possibly best-case scenarios are either a two-pronged, frontal assault on the citizenry by both forces or the replacement of one hegemony (state) by the other (capital); either option impedes the constitution of a truly democratic public sphere. ... Although much of contemporary Africa lacks the kind of strong democratic culture necessary to sustain a truly public service media, it nonetheless retains a normative appeal worth aspiring to. ... One way or another, the state has to play a key role in funding the system, even as there must be institutional mechanisms to protect it from the shenanigans of politicians and government bureaucrats.<sup>165</sup>

## **Australia**

If commercialized media systems produced the freest, most diverse and pluralistic public sphere possible, then Australia would be ancient Athens on a continental scale. Australia's media system is and has been one of the most commercialized in the world, and it boasts the world's highest degree of concentration in media ownership.<sup>166</sup> While Hallin and Mancini have suggested that Australia might fit within the Liberal media system model, it deviates in significant ways: a historically late development of professional journalism

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<sup>165</sup> Aginam, "Media in 'Globalizing'," at 133-134.

<sup>166</sup> Paul K. Jones and Michael Pusey, "Political Communication and 'Media System': The Australian Canary," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 3 (2010): 453.



and formal recognition for press freedom; relatively low levels of education for journalists; very low per capita funding for public service media (like the United States, but unlike Britain); and weak regulation for commercial TV.<sup>167</sup> It also features some of the negative aspects of the Polarized Pluralist model, like clientelism and a lack of independence for public service media, with none of the model's positive aspects, like a healthy diversity of partisan newspapers.<sup>168</sup>

Most damning about Australia's commercialized media system are its effects. Results from a large survey of Australians found that reliance on commercial versus public television news was a stronger predictor of political ignorance than even low levels of education and low social class.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, Australia<sup>170</sup> "offers a canary-like early warning to other nation-states" considering turning to a more deregulated, commercialized media system.<sup>171</sup>

## **China**

China is often thought to be a totalitarian state exercising absolute control over its media system: the polar opposite not only of the democratic ideal, but also of much-freer Western media systems. This may have been largely accurate in the first few decades after China's revolution, but today the relationship between China's media system and that of the U.S. has changed considerably. In many ways, China's contemporary media system has

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 456-457.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 464-465.

<sup>170</sup> Nearby New Zealand offers much the same warning. After its public media system was restructured in the direction of a commercial model in 1988, content analyses have noted a steady deterioration and tabloidization of news coverage. (Cushion, 2012, 70-72)

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 467.

come to resemble its U.S. counterpart. Instead of being a polar opposite, China's media system seems more like its doppelganger: certainly less free and further from the democratic ideal, but in ways that are becoming harder to define; meanwhile, certain uncomfortable similarities are becoming more apparent.

Lately, China is considered by many to have embraced capitalism, but it would be more accurate to say that it instead has only *implemented* some aspects of capitalism. This is apparent in the private capital the Chinese government has invited into many sectors of the economy; conspicuously absent among them, however, is the news media sector. News media outlets continue to be monopolized by the state, while only peripheral areas of the media and culture industry, like entertainment and advertising,<sup>172</sup> have been opened to private capital.<sup>173</sup> The news media is considered sacrosanct, not only because the media is far too powerful to allow potential opponents of the Communist Party to use it, but also because the Party's justificatory mantle of socialism might be damaged by introducing capitalism into such a visible industry, and lastly to avoid Russia's disastrous experience with capitalist restoration.<sup>174</sup> The power of the media is unquestionable even in a country like the United States, with a population relatively ignorant and apathetic about politics; in China, where nationwide surveys reveal that only 10% of the population is *not* interested

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<sup>172</sup> Although even this limited opening to private capital has upset leftists among the Party, most upper-middle ranking officials in the propaganda establishment seem to recognize that market-driven popular culture serves as a soporific, helping to sustain the regime. In an ironic turn, the Chinese government seems to be consciously using capitalist popular culture in place of religion as the opiate of the masses. (Zhao, 2008, 223)

<sup>173</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, "Understanding China's Media System in a World Historical Context," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 143-173 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 153.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

in international news, and only 20% are *not* interested in politics,<sup>175</sup> the media's power and importance is even greater.

Chinese newspapers can be distinguished between three main types: official, semi-official, and commercialized,<sup>176</sup> in increasing order of commercialization.<sup>177</sup> Chinese citizens broadly consider commercialized papers to be far more trustworthy than official papers,<sup>178</sup> due to their perceived greater autonomy from the state and its Propaganda Department – as a result, commercialized newspapers also exert the greatest effects on public opinion.<sup>179</sup> Of course, the perception of autonomy is merely that, a perception; the reality is that while commercialized papers have some leeway to differ from the official line, they usually follow the restrictions handed down by propaganda officials.<sup>180</sup> Topics that the government considers to be “sensitive” are largely restricted to official papers, where the messages can be more directly controlled.<sup>181</sup> While there are often variations in tone in the way official, semi-official, and commercialized papers cover stories, these varied tones are rarely if ever discordant.<sup>182</sup> Only framing styles differ significantly between the three types of papers, with nonofficial papers often using the episodic and human interest frames popular in Western commercial media, while official papers tend to use thematic frames more common to Western public service media.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>176</sup> Chinese media practitioners prefer the term “marketization” to “commercialization” for ideological reasons, but for the sake of continuity I use the latter term. (Chan, 2010, 10)

<sup>177</sup> Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 31.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 165, 227.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 43, 207-218.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 174.

The results of media commercialization in China are the opposite of what many Western liberals had hoped. Instead of promoting a more pluralistic debate eventually leading to the overthrow of the Communist Party and the introduction of capitalist democracy, the commercialization of part of the newspaper market has *enhanced* the Party's ability to shape public opinion through the media.<sup>184</sup>

Alongside such “sophisticated propaganda” in its newspaper market, the Chinese government continues to use traditional techniques of repression. While it has introduced a policy of economic liberalization since the 1990s, at the same time China has expanded and strengthened its government agencies responsible for overseeing the media.<sup>185</sup> Currently, China jails more internet activists than any other country.<sup>186</sup> Most important among China's media regulatory agencies is the Propaganda Department (PD), which guides the media through rules, explicit and implicit policy statements, instructions, and face-to-face meetings.<sup>187</sup> (The Chinese term for “propaganda,” *xuanchuan*, is not a pejorative; it is similar in valence to “persuasion.”)<sup>188</sup> The PD has decentralized its control over the media, effectively deputizing editors and journalists to serve as propaganda officials under threat of losing their jobs – this sometimes results in media workers becoming more draconian censors than PD officials themselves.<sup>189</sup> Internet content providers are required to employ their own censors, to join hundreds of thousands of government officials and tens of thousands of “internet police” and “internet monitors” in applying censorship guidelines.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>185</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008): 22-23.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>188</sup> Stockmann, *Media Commercialization*, 164.

<sup>189</sup> Zhao, *Communication*, 33.

<sup>190</sup> Gary King et al., "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 02 (2013): 326.

Interestingly, the Chinese government has focused its powers of censorship on *leftist* critiques of the Party's policies, following Deng Xiaoping's instruction to "guard against the right, but guard primarily against the left."<sup>191</sup> "Leftism" and the specter of the Cultural Revolution are used in contemporary China the way that the terror of international communism was used during the Cold War period in the United States.<sup>192</sup> The Left is seen to be particularly threatening to the Party since it uses the moral authority and values of socialism to critique the party-state's abandonment of the same.<sup>193</sup>

The PD applies separate policies to different forms of media. Television, which reaches the largest audience, is the most closely controlled. Mass-circulation newspapers are thoroughly controlled, but niche journals are given more leeway, and the internet (with its relatively limited audience for any individual outlet) is the least controlled. The PD's strategy is summed up by one Shanghai writer as: "as long as no one reads them, they don't care."<sup>194</sup> Hence Yuezhi Zhao's conclusion that "the fate of critical ideas in the partially liberalized and fragmented Chinese media system is increasingly similar to that of critical ideas in Western media systems."<sup>195</sup> If one knows where to look, Americans can read Noam Chomsky or Gore Vidal's critiques of U.S. foreign policy and the Chinese can read Mobo Gao or Minqi Li's critiques of Chinese economic policy – just as it is *possible*, strictly speaking, to find a needle in a haystack.

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<sup>191</sup> Zhao, *Communication*, 51, 54. As noted earlier, this would be the *political* Left, not the *psychological* Left, which in China would favor greater marketization and a reduced role for the state.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-341.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>195</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, "Who Wants Democracy and Does It Deliver Food? Communication and Power in a Globally Integrated China," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 57-79 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 65.

The partial commercialization of the Chinese media has created pressures for some outlets to offer challenging content, including investigative journalism<sup>196</sup> revealing corrupt officials.<sup>197</sup> But the PD imposes limits on muckraking, constraining it to low-ranking officials and avoiding the most sensitive topics; investigative journalism is performed by “watchdogs on party leashes.”<sup>198</sup> Furthermore, the balance of market forces leans toward keeping a good relationship with the government to remain profitable<sup>199</sup> – the same pressure that exists in many commercialized Western media systems. Another pressure China shares in common with many commercialized Western systems is the need to attract a wealthy audience, which along with PD guidance results in economic issues being covered from the perspective and in the interest of the wealthy.<sup>200</sup> Likewise, and as in Western media systems without direct government subsidies, market forces in China are eliminating media outlets and perspectives catering to the working class and the poor.<sup>201</sup> This has pushed leftists and other critics of neoliberalism onto the internet, where the only serious challenge to China’s economic and social policies has been relegated.<sup>202</sup> However, even among the relatively small audience of netizens, nearly two-thirds read PD-controlled websites instead of critical sites like blogs.<sup>203</sup> This sort of ghettoization of anti-neoliberal ideas on the internet is clearly apparent in the United States as well.

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<sup>196</sup> Many Chinese journalists admire the professional norms and critical culture of U.S. journalists, but this influence may be waning. Many Chinese journalists have been dismayed to observe American journalists betraying their own ideals, typified by sensationalist, shoddy, and biased reporting on the Clinton sex scandal, Yeltsin’s attack on the Russian parliament, NATO’s bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. (Zhao, 2005, 69)

<sup>197</sup> Stockmann, *Media Commercialization*, 140.

<sup>198</sup> Zhao, *Communication*, 253.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>202</sup> Zhao, “Understanding,” 171; Zhao, *Communication*, 305.

<sup>203</sup> Stockmann, *Media Commercialization*, 145.

China applies a sophisticated censorship strategy throughout all forms of media. While the Party's ownership<sup>204</sup> of television news outlets makes its control of TV straightforward, along the lines of what a Western reader of *1984* might imagine Big Brother doing, newspapers and the internet are controlled quite differently, even ingeniously. For newspapers, negative or legitimacy-threatening stories are either ignored or reported only in low-circulation, local papers in the area where the underlying event or scandal occurred – “localization” – while sensitive stories on a national level that cannot be localized are subjected to “coordination,” whereby the PD addresses the story in a coordinated fashion across all newspapers, crowding out any alternate perspectives.<sup>205</sup> On the internet, a series of clever experiments have revealed that the PD does *not* attempt to censor criticism of the government.<sup>206</sup> In fact, government censors allow a broad range of strident, even vitriolic criticism of the state; what they do *not* allow, however, are efforts to collectively organize offline around an issue or grievance. This sophisticated censorship strategy works: at least among those without high levels of education, greater exposure to the media correlates with greater support for the government.<sup>207</sup>

This strategy of “sophisticated propaganda” has been enormously successful, from the perspective of the Party.<sup>208</sup> It has avoided one problem noted by Karl Marx that censorship can cause: “The government hears only *its own voice*, it knows that it hears only its own voice, yet it harbours the illusion that it hears the voice of the people, and it

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<sup>204</sup> Zhao, *Communication*, 103.

<sup>205</sup> Roberts and Stewart, “Localization and Coordination.”

<sup>206</sup> King et al., “How Censorship”; Gary King et al., “Reverse-Engineering Censorship in China: Randomized Experimentation and Participant Observation,” *Science* 345, no. 6199 (2014).

<sup>207</sup> Kennedy, “Maintaining”.

<sup>208</sup> Guoguang Wu, “The Birth of Sophisticated Propaganda: The Party State and the Chinese Media in Post-Reform Politics,” in *China's New Media Milieu: Commercialization, Continuity, and Reform*, ed. Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Catherine Welch, 61-78, No. IPR-14023 (Alexandria VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2010): 68.

demands that the people, too, should itself harbour this illusion.”<sup>209</sup> By allowing even vehement criticism of the Party and its policies in online ghettos, the government is able to hear the voice of the people. However, Marx’s following line was: “For its part, therefore, the people sinks partly into political superstition, partly into political disbelief, or, completely turning away from political life, becomes a *rabble of private individuals*.”<sup>210</sup> Preserving this “rabble” of disconnected, unorganized individuals seems to be a conscious goal of China’s sophisticated censorship, a goal the Chinese state has thus far successfully attained.

## **Latin America**

While depoliticization – at least outside of state-sanctioned organizations – seems to be a goal of the contemporary Chinese media system, traditionally, communist countries sought to *mobilize* the masses through the media. This was the opposite of the rightwing military dictatorships that ruled Latin American countries for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: their stability rested on acquiescence and depoliticization, and their media systems helped achieve this goal by avoiding politics and focusing on entertainment.<sup>211</sup> As Jairo Lugo-Ocando explains, this has even deeper historical roots in Latin America: “the dictatorships and elitist democracies which exchanged power throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were careful to craft the media systems so as to prevent general access, and

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<sup>209</sup> Karl Marx, “On Freedom of the Press,” Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly - Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates (May, 1842): 34.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Voltmer, “How Far,” 237.



guarantee their role as mechanisms of control.”<sup>212</sup> So long as access was restricted to those who could afford to buy or build a media company, further control was made unnecessary. An identity of class interest among those who owned the media, industry, land, and government obviated any need for more elaborate means of control. And as a UN Development Program survey of Latin American political leaders, business elites, entrepreneurs, academics, and 41 presidents revealed, the media is considered to be the second most powerful force in society, after only the corporate/business/financial sector.<sup>213</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many countries in Latin America have elected left-leaning governments, and these have been pushing for media system reform. Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela have all introduced legislation to break up media monopolies and introduce new regulations to better define what should be publicly controlled and what should be privately controlled in the media sphere.<sup>214</sup> These legislative efforts seek to reorganize existing state media, create new public television stations, restrict the concentrated ownership of media, and support alternative and community media, among other goals.<sup>215</sup> Unsurprisingly, these efforts have provoked an almost Pavlovian response from the traditionally-privileged class of media owners, who have launched a propaganda counteroffensive crying out about threats to freedom of the

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<sup>212</sup> Jairo Lugo-Ocando, “An Introduction to the *Maquilas* of Power: Media and Political Transition in Latin America,” in *The Media in Latin America*, edited by Jairo Lugo-Ocando, 1-12 (Maidenhead UK: Open University Press, 2008): 1.

<sup>213</sup> Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, *La Democracia en América Latina: Hacia una Democracia de Ciudadanas y Ciudadanos* (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, Altea, Alfaguara, 2004): 161.

<sup>214</sup> Dênis de Moraes, “Batalhas pela Diversidade: O Que Aprender com as Experiências Latino-Americanas,” in *Em Defesa de uma Opinião Pública Democrática*, ed. Venício A. de Lima et al., 219-237 (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014): 223-224.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

press.<sup>216</sup> Thomas Paine may be laughing in his grave at how his two-century old observation still holds: “Nothing is more common with printers, especially of newspapers, than the continual cry of the Liberty of the Press, as if because they are printers they are to have more privileges than other people.”<sup>217</sup> And Paulo Freire may be smiling smugly in his, repeating his observation that “former oppressors do not feel liberated. On the contrary, they genuinely consider themselves to be oppressed.”<sup>218</sup>

In Brazil, for instance, problems with its media system go back to its earliest days. While Spain established universities in its colonies, Portugal limited education in Brazil and forbade its colony from having printing facilities until 1808, when the royal court was forced to flee to Rio to escape from Napoleon’s troops.<sup>219</sup> As the 17<sup>th</sup> century priest and philosopher Antônio Vieira wrote:

The worst accident to befall Brazil in her infirmity was the taking of her ability to speak: often she wanted to make a just complaint, many times she wanted to ask for medicine for her ailments, but always the words stuck in her throat, or they were silenced out of deference, or due to violence; and if ever some whisper reached the ears of one who should provide a remedy, so too would come the voices of power and overwhelm the cries of reason.<sup>220</sup>

This problem continues today. Despite over a decade of rule by center-left administrations, little progress has been made in media reform. (Strangely, Brazil is one of very few countries to be governed by a leftist administration without having a single major media

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>217</sup> Thomas Paine, *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1955): 429.

<sup>218</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1996): 39.

<sup>219</sup> de Albuquerque, “On Models,” 79.

<sup>220</sup> Quoted in Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 181, translation mine.

outlet sympathetic to the Left.)<sup>221</sup> Articles of the Brazilian Constitution which prohibit media monopolies and require private, public, and state media outlets to provide a diversity of socially-beneficial programming remain dead letters.<sup>222</sup> More than twenty years after its current constitution entered into force, the Brazilian Congress has failed to pass legislation to give these provisions any teeth.<sup>223</sup> Therefore, and in violation of its own constitution, the Brazilian media system continues to be dominated by an oligopoly controlled by a few families.<sup>224</sup> Today the Brazilian media plays a clear political role, purportedly to represent the “national interest” – as interpreted by its owners, of course.<sup>225</sup> As a result, Brazil has a two-faced political regime: to outside observers, as its constitution states, Brazil is a republic under the rule of law; to those observing from the inside, the reality is quite different.<sup>226</sup> The Brazilian media system, a “monstrous amalgamation” in the words of Brazilian jurist Fábio Konder Comparato, has managed to unite farce and tragedy.<sup>227</sup>

Similar to Brazil, Mexico’s media system is dominated by an oligopoly controlled by a small number of elite families.<sup>228</sup> It follows the general Latin American pattern of emphasizing entertainment to the detriment of hard political news and a diversity of perspectives – as the head of Mexico’s largest commercial television network colorfully

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<sup>221</sup> Leonardo Avritzer, “Democracia Participativa, Esfera Pública e Opinião Pública Democrática,” in *Em Defesa de uma Opinião Pública Democrática*, ed. Venício A. de Lima et al., 59-86 (São Paulo: Paulus, 2014): 73.

<sup>222</sup> Carolina Matos, “Media Democratization in Brazil, Revisited,” in *Brazil Emerging: Inequality and Emancipation*, ed. Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Adalberto Cardoso, 155-170 (New York: Routledge, 2014): 160-161.

<sup>223</sup> Comparato, “Prefácio,” 13.

<sup>224</sup> de Lima, “Normas Legais,” 192-193.

<sup>225</sup> de Albuquerque, “On Models,” 93.

<sup>226</sup> Comparato, “Prefácio,” 11.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Here Comparato is referring to James Madison’s famous warning that a democratic government without democratic press would be but the prelude to a farce, a tragedy, or perhaps both.

<sup>228</sup> Sallie Hughes, “The Media in Mexico: From Authoritarian Institution to Hybrid System,” in *The Media in Latin America*, ed. Jairo Lugo-Ocando, 131-149 (Maidenhead UK: Open University Press, 2008): 131-132.

described, "Mexico is a country of a modest, very fucked class, which will never stop being fucked. Television has an obligation to bring diversion to these people..."<sup>229</sup> The political coverage that does appear on television is hamstrung by both political and commercial influences. An analysis of Mexican television coverage of recent elections found that most public service broadcasters suffered from a lack of independence from government, while most commercial broadcasters provided biased coverage out of financial and political motives.<sup>230</sup>

However, the changing political tide in Latin America may eventually result in the formation of vastly different media systems that uphold rather than subvert democracy. For now, most media systems in Latin America serve as a warning of the danger of commercialism, particularly in countries with vast disparities in wealth and little distinction between business and political elites.

## **India**

India shares in common with many African countries a media history influenced by British colonialism (not to mention some of the most abject poverty and glaring wealth disparities in the world). Television broadcasting in India remained a state monopoly until 1990, when the market was opened to commercial channels.<sup>231</sup> In the 1990s, with a reduction in the amount of government interference, some observers noted a short-lived improvement in news coverage. However, by the 2000s commercial competition had reduced Indian TV news to a sensationalist form of entertainment. Although several official reports have

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<sup>229</sup> Quoted in Curran, *Media and Power*, 238.

<sup>230</sup> Sallie Hughes and Chappell H. Lawson, "Propaganda and Crony Capitalism: Partisan Bias in Mexican Television News," *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>231</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 180-181.

identified problems and offered solutions, and the Supreme Court of India has ruled that the broadcast spectrum is public property, these words have done little but collect dust.<sup>232</sup> However, there are signs that movements at the local and state levels could succeed at introducing small public and community radio stations.<sup>233</sup>

Also like Africa, in India electronic media are far more widespread than print, owing to an official literacy rate that stands at only 65%, but which alternate measures estimate to be as low as 26%.<sup>234</sup> As in much of Latin America, ownership of Indian news media is highly concentrated and is used to augment its owners' political power. Meanwhile, issues of importance to mass numbers of the poor, ethnic minorities ("tribals"), micro-entrepreneurs and farmers – in other words, the majority of the population – go largely unmentioned in the mass media, and unaddressed by the political system. As the editors of India's *Analytical Monthly Review* conclude: "Under these circumstances the claim to be the 'largest democracy' amounts to fraud."<sup>235</sup>

## Japan

Japan's media system, while sharing much in common with those of the United States and Europe, is unique in some interesting ways. It features a strong public service broadcaster, the NHK, which content analyses have described as impartial, covering all political parties, and avoiding sensationalism.<sup>236</sup> On the other hand, the NHK is at least

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<sup>232</sup> Pradip Thomas, "Contested Futures: Indian Media at the Crossroads," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 81-99 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 93-94.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>234</sup> Editors, *Analytical Monthly Review*, "The Reality of Media in India," *Analytical Monthly Review* (July-August, 2013): 1.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>236</sup> Rodney Benson and Matthew Powers, "Public Media and Political Independence: Lessons for the Future of Journalism from Around the World," *Free Press* (February, 2011): 42.

*vulnerable* to political interference, since it relies upon annual funding decisions by the government. TV news is carefully monitored to ensure equal coverage for political candidates, and newspapers do not take editorial stands during elections. At the same time, major newspapers in Japan have earned a reputation for being critical of government policy, acting as an ersatz opposition party during the Liberal Democratic Party's long post-war reign.<sup>237</sup> There are few interlocking directorates and little cross-industry ownership of media stock, and Japanese law prevents outside takeovers of media companies. Media companies are close to being employee-owned, as their boards of directors are composed of the companies' own managers.<sup>238</sup> On a structural level, the Japanese media system is extremely diverse and pluralistic.

Nevertheless, newspapers do have close links to the banks they rely on for borrowing, and industrial firms own minority shares of media firms. More importantly, reporters develop close relationships with business and government through the Japanese press club system, although journalists try to remain independent from government and business on the one hand, and social movements for change on the other.<sup>239</sup> These pressures, along with cultural and historical influences, have resulted in a spectrum of opinion within the Japanese media that is even narrower than that of the United States.

The example of Japan demonstrates that while strong public service media and intelligently-regulated commercial media produce laudable democratic outcomes, these are insufficient on their own. As Ellis Krauss argues: "What may be distinctive about Japan is not that nonpluralist and controlled elements exist, but rather that in Japan the

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<sup>237</sup> William Kelly et al., "Kisha Kurabu and Koho: Japanese Media Relations and Public Relations," *Public Relations Review* 28, no. 3 (2002): 266.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-268.

institutions of newspaper and broadcast journalism, business, and the state connect in such a way that their information processes have often wound up limiting the pluralism and autonomy that the formal structures *should* provide."<sup>240</sup>

## **Russia**

Perhaps the worst experience any country has had with a commercialized media system is Russia's. Surveying the wreckage, some Russian journalists and media observers have concluded that the problem was the Russian media's failure to comply with market laws. In this view, if only creative destruction had been allowed to work in the 1990s, forcing unprofitable companies to close down and leaving only those who could support themselves through legal advertising and sales, things would have been different. As Olessia Koltsova points out, however:

The irony is that Russian media *did* comply with market laws, responding to the existing demand – only the service demanded, as well as the sources of demand were, from a normative point of view, 'wrong.' Media's main clients were not audiences, and not even legal advertisers, but hidden promoters, propagandists and external owners. They, in turn, have been very busy solving their own problems: bargaining for new rules of the political game, arranging privatization auctions and distributing oil fields. The Russian audience has been silently watching this show.<sup>241</sup>

It was no small feat for the reformed, commercialized media system of the 1990s to perform worse than the Soviet system. During the Soviet era, editors worked under strict

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<sup>240</sup> Ellis S. Krauss, "The Mass Media and Japanese Politics: Effects and Consequences," in *Media and Politics in Japan*, ed. Susan J. Pharr and Ellis S. Krauss, 355-373 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996): 358.

<sup>241</sup> Olessia Koltsova, *News Media and Power in Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 160.

instructions from Communist Party bosses, and all media executives were appointed by the Party and had to be Party members. Oftentimes, those appointed to leadership positions had no experience in journalism, and they viewed their time leading a media outlet as a mere stepping stone to a higher post in the Party. Several techniques were used to ensure that only the most ideologically committed were given jobs as journalists, and Party “tutors” were sometimes assigned to young journalists at their workplaces.<sup>242</sup> Given Marx’s views on censorship,<sup>243</sup> this was hardly an ideal *communist* media system, let alone a democratic one.

The market reforms of the 1990s were at first vigorously supported by many Russian journalists, at least those convinced that most of what ailed Russia owed to its planned economy, and that Russia would soon enjoy Western living standards once it adopted a market economy. They quickly learned otherwise, once inflation went rampant and most newspapers and magazines turned unprofitable. By 1996, major newspapers had lost up to 95% of their circulation, while television stations found their state funding repeatedly cut. Yet, “breaking all classical Western market laws, the number of mass media outlets did not drop and even continued growing.”<sup>244</sup> The reason for this anomaly was that as state property was converted into private property under the tutelage of leading Western economists, an incredible amount of wealth was up for grabs – and those doing the grabbing quickly realized that the power of the media could be used to bolster their claims. On the other side of the equation, desperate journalists and media managers chose prostitution over destitution, selling propaganda services to Russia’s robber barons to stay

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>243</sup> Marx, “On Freedom.”

<sup>244</sup> Koltsova, *News Media*, 36.



afloat.<sup>245</sup> Budding oligarchs would also sometimes pay even more to block the propaganda paid for by a rival, leading to bidding wars between propagandists and propaganda-blockers; both propaganda and propaganda-blocking services became included in the price lists offered to potential customers by media companies by the late 1990s.<sup>246</sup> Such propaganda was often addressed not to the reading or viewing public, but to government officials in charge of making decisions about privatizing state property.<sup>247</sup> Unsurprisingly, Russian journalism quickly lost the moral legitimacy it had developed during the early *perestroika* period, and became one of Russia's most criticized professions.<sup>248</sup> The idea of journalism as a form of prostitution<sup>249</sup> spread widely during this period of "media wars," and the status of Russian journalism has yet to recover.<sup>250</sup>

The propaganda techniques developed during the media wars of the 1990s were soon applied to political elections, beginning with Yeltsin's re-election campaign in 1996.<sup>251</sup> Facing a well-deserved 3-5% approval rating – the Russian economy had plummeted by 60%, male life expectancy had fallen from 68 to 56, and millions had been reduced to subsistence farming – Yeltsin needed a miracle.<sup>252</sup> He hired professional spin doctors,

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>248</sup> Elena Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," In *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 119-142 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 137.

<sup>249</sup> Deputy Minister for Communication Alexei Volin reportedly made this statement in a recent lecture to journalism students at Moscow State University: "We should give students a clear understanding: they are going to work for The Man, and The Man will tell them what to write, how to write, and what not to write about certain things. And The Man has the right to do it because he pays them." (quoted in Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, 11)

<sup>250</sup> Natalia Roudakova, "Comparing Process: Media, 'Transitions,' and Historical Change," in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 246-277 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 260-261.

<sup>251</sup> Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," New York: Institute of Modern Russia (2014): 10.

<sup>252</sup> Mark Ames, "Neocons 2.0: The Problem with Peter Pomerantsev," *Pando Daily* (May 17, 2015).

including the American Dick Morris, as “political technologists” to apply the techniques of Western advertising to his seemingly doomed campaign. Mark Ames, whose own newspaper was shut down by Putin’s regime in 2008, describes the shocking success of this move:

What surprised even Dick Morris’ spin-doctor buddies was how effective they were in fooling the raw Russian public into believing that their crude propaganda efforts, distorting reality to falsely portray opposition candidate Zyuganov as a genocidaire-in-waiting, was not propaganda at all. In the late Soviet times, most Russians knew that the far cruder Soviet propaganda was propaganda—but this was something new, the ability to wildly distort reality, paint your political opponent as the greatest monster in history, and have it accepted as news because it looked much more modern than the crude old Soviet propaganda productions.<sup>253</sup>

Political technologists have since become a central feature of Russia’s media system. Gleb Pavlovsky, a Russian political technologist who worked on Putin’s campaign, explains that the power of modern media techniques have created vastly more effective means of shaping public opinion: “The main difference between propaganda in the USSR and the new Russia is that in Soviet times the concept of truth was important. Even if they were lying they took care to prove what they were doing was ‘the truth.’ Now no one even tries proving the ‘truth.’ You can just say anything. Create realities.”<sup>254</sup>

In terms of media regulation, the Russian system in the 1990s most closely resembled that of Latin America, particularly Brazil, where broadcast licenses were

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Quoted in Pomerantsev and Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality,” 9.

distributed not by following legal rules but on the basis of personal or business relationships.<sup>255</sup> As in Latin America, Russia's top media owners and managers belonged to the same political and business elite that ran the government.<sup>256</sup> The close connections between the media and political elites did not always guarantee cooperation, however: state power was often used, via selective enforcement of tax laws, rental rates, and even sanitary and fire safety regulations, to punish "bad" media and reward "good" media.<sup>257</sup>

By 1999, the Russian media system witnessed the entrance of a new kind of media outlet: a "private-state" monopolist with great power resources – and which, coincidentally or not, supported Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign.<sup>258</sup> After Putin won the 2000 presidential election, the Russian media system began another major transformation, beginning with the government extending its control over national TV channels.<sup>259</sup> In the early 2000s, state agencies established managerial or financial control over 80% of the regional press, 70% of the electronic media, and 20% of the national press.<sup>260</sup> Nationwide television channels, the most influential form of media in Russia, were the most important objects of control. They were used to generate support for the political system, minimize politically threatening debates, and recreate a unified national identity. Meanwhile, Russia's new advertising and entertainment media took the place of free political debate, filling TV sets with commercial fluff and helping to depoliticize Russian journalism. In this way, Russia's contemporary media system has managed to combine the worst features of both government and commercial media.

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<sup>255</sup> Koltsova, *News Media*, 76.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 54-55.

<sup>258</sup> Koltsova, *News Media*, 42.

<sup>259</sup> Vartanova, "The Russian Media," 127.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

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This brief survey of media systems throughout the world has revealed how rare it is to find a media system that fulfills even the most minimal requirements of democracy. Clearly, media systems are not separate from broader social, political, and economic structures. Countries with more democratic political systems tend to also have media systems that better meet the standards of democracy.<sup>261</sup> None of this suggests one-way causation from a democratic political structure to a democratic media system, however. It is more likely that media systems and political systems influence each other – and if this is so, then improving a country’s media system should also help to improve the political system (and vice versa).

By democratic standards, the best media systems in the world are those following the Democratic Corporatist model (possibly including Japan). One of this model’s most prominent features is the size, reach, quality, and independence of public service media. This sharply contrasts not only with the U.S. media system, but media systems in much of the rest of the world. Therefore, the next section will investigate what researchers have learned about the performance and effects of public service media as against commercial media.

### **vii. The Beeb vs. Madison Avenue: Do public service or commercial media outperform in informing?**

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<sup>261</sup> Sven Engesser and Annika Franzetti, "Media Systems and Political Systems: Dimensions of Comparison," *International Communication Gazette* 73, no. 4 (2011): 295.

Many questions in social science do not have clear answers. Often investigations are frustrated by a lack of comprehensive data, complicating factors that wash out expected effects, or the simple inability to perform experiments that can tell us anything straightforward about how complex human societies operate. Thankfully, the question of whether public service or commercial media do a better job at informing democratic citizens about the political realm *has* been definitively answered. Over 250 studies and statistical analyses have focused on this question, and the clear result is that public service media outperform commercial media in every important aspect of providing political information (with the possible exception of war reporting).<sup>262</sup> When well-trained journalists are given a salary and guidance from editors independent of political and commercial pressures, and are told to report the news so as to best inform their fellow citizens about the political realm – that is most commonly exactly what happens. Study after study comparing commercial and public service media, most covering the U.S. and Europe, comes to this same conclusion. Public service media has also been found to support democratic outcomes in countries transitioning from military dictatorships in Latin America and authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe.<sup>263</sup> Generously-funded public service media attract a large share of the audience (usually between 30-50% in Europe),<sup>264</sup> and its influence, alongside the influence of content and structural regulations, makes commercial news media do a better job as well. Nor is this a new pattern; it was in evidence since the rise of television.<sup>265</sup> The key factor that can prevent public service media

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<sup>262</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 12, 205.

<sup>263</sup> Katrin Voltmer and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, "New Democracies without Citizens? Mass Media and Democratic Orientations – A Four-Country Comparison," in *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies*, ed. Katrin Voltmer, 226-250 (New York: Psychology Press, 2006): 238-240.

<sup>264</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing*, 43.

<sup>265</sup> Raymond Williams, *Communications*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976): 64-66.

from performing this beneficial role is political interference – as occurs regularly in usual suspects like China and Russia, but also in African countries, and even in the U.S., when attempts to interfere with PBS were made by Antonin Scalia in the Nixon administration<sup>266</sup> and Kenneth Tomlinson in the second Bush administration.<sup>267</sup> However, as an analysis of 36 democracies demonstrated, *de jure* independence from government – that is, legislation protecting managers and editors from political interference – is strikingly successful at providing true, *de facto* independence.<sup>268</sup>

Perhaps the most heartening finding about the effects of well-funded, independent public service media is that they exert a positive influence on the other, commercial players in the media system. In Britain, Rupert Murdoch has so far proven unable to “Fox-ify” his Sky News channel by making it more like his staunchly partisan, sensationalistic Fox News channel in the United States. The impediment? Partly it is Britain’s public service regulations for commercial stations, but it is also the due to the influence of the BBC on British audiences, which has raised standards and fostered a demand for impartial, high-quality reporting.<sup>269</sup> The BBC’s effects on the culture of journalism in Britain have also helped impede “Foxification,” and is another reason why Murdoch reports that his Sky News team does not listen to him.<sup>270</sup> This trend holds for 13 European countries: while there is a slight tendency for commercial media to negatively influence their public service

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<sup>266</sup> Ladd, *Why Americans*, 77-78.

<sup>267</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, “Afterword,” in *Liberty and the News*, by Walter Lippmann, 63-88 (La Vergne TN: BN Publishing, 2012): 76.

<sup>268</sup> Chris Hanretty, “Explaining the De Facto Independence of Public Broadcasters,” *British Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 01 (2010).

<sup>269</sup> Stephen Cushion and Justin Lewis, “Towards a ‘Foxification’ of 24-hour News Channels in Britain? An Analysis of Market-Driven and Publicly Funded News Coverage,” *Journalism* 10, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>270</sup> Stephen Cushion and Bob Franklin, “Public Service Broadcasting: Markets and ‘Vulnerable Vales’ in Broadcast and Print Journalism,” In *Can the Media Serve Democracy? Essays in Honour of Jay G. Blumler*, ed. Stephen Coleman et al., 65-75 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 68-69.

counterparts, the greater trend is for public service media to positively influence their commercial counterparts.<sup>271</sup> This positive trend is also in evidence in election coverage.<sup>272</sup> Strong public service media do not push commercial media out of the hard news market;<sup>273</sup> instead, they raise the bar. For instance, when Sweden introduced commercial television in 1991, the new commercial channel attracted young and less-knowledgeable viewers, and it increased their levels of political knowledge – most likely thanks to the high journalistic standards set by Sweden’s public service media.<sup>274</sup>

While market pressures do ensure that commercial media are answerable to their customers, the customers of commercial media are advertisers, not citizens. As such, commercial media are only somewhat accountable to the citizenry for their news coverage. On the other hand, since public service media are dependent upon public funding for their survival, they are more directly accountable to the public for their news coverage.<sup>275</sup> Little wonder then, that public service media are far more trusted than their commercial counterparts in both Britain and the U.S.<sup>276</sup>

Public service media with a dominant position in a country’s media market can produce other benefits besides a better-informed citizenry. They can help produce national political integration by providing a virtual public sphere in which a majority of citizens are exposed to the same broad range of information and debates, thereby preventing partisan

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<sup>271</sup> Frank Esser et al., "Political Information Opportunities in Europe: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study of Thirteen Television Systems," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 3 (2012): 261; Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 89-90.

<sup>272</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 124.

<sup>273</sup> Popescu and Tóka, "Public Television," 16.

<sup>274</sup> Andrea Prat and David Strömberg, "Commercial Television and Voter Information," CEPR Discussion Paper No. 4989 (2005): 23-24.

<sup>275</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 201.

<sup>276</sup> Cushion and Franklin, "Public Service Broadcasting," 69.

segmentation and polarization.<sup>277</sup> While the commercial media attempts to match consumer choices and adapt to niche markets, public service media attempts to operate above market manipulation by creating a uniform environment for informing and educating the society as a whole.<sup>278</sup> (Partisan segmentation and polarization can be caused not only by a fragmented commercial media environment, but increasingly from receiving news through online social networks.)<sup>279</sup> As an analysis of 13 countries found, the effects of strong public service media in less fragmented media systems are quite positive: they increase aggregate levels of political information and engagement, and reduce knowledge gaps between socio-economic strata.<sup>280</sup> These effects occur not only through direct exposure to strong public media outlets, but also through the so-called “two-step flow” of information, as everyday conversations become more permeated with news content.<sup>281</sup> This point was reinforced by a separate study of 12 European countries plus Israel, which found that countries with more competitive (fragmented) media systems provide lower levels of political information than countries with fewer channels.<sup>282</sup>

### **viii. Differences in presentation between public service and commercial media**

To better understand the differing effects produced by public service and commercial media, several studies have investigated differences in how they present the

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<sup>277</sup> Elihu Katz, "And Deliver Us from Segmentation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1996).

<sup>278</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 25.

<sup>279</sup> Bennett, "Changing Societies," 157.

<sup>280</sup> Lilach Nir, "Public Space: How Shared News Landscapes Close Gaps in Political Engagement," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 581.

<sup>282</sup> Esser et al., "Political Information Opportunities," 261.



news. In Britain, public broadcasters feature more hard news on foreign affairs, politics, and social/economic issues than their commercial counterparts, which focus to a greater degree on sport, crime, entertainment, and human interest stories.<sup>283</sup> In France, Britain, and Germany, public service media give greater coverage to elections than commercial media.<sup>284</sup> Sound bites allotted to candidates are longer in these three European countries than in the United States, and within the European countries (at least during 2000-2001) public service media provided longer sound bites than commercial media. Sound bites for candidates in the U.S. commercial media have shortened considerably over time, and only a small proportion of these few seconds of sound bites contain any substantive content.<sup>285</sup> Also, the public service media of several Northern European countries provide more election coverage than the more commercialized media systems of the U.S. and U.K., particularly during peak time when more people are watching television.<sup>286</sup> Another key facet of news presentations is how stories are framed. Are stories put into a wider context (thematic framing), or are they presented without contextual information as if they were merely one-off events (episodic framing)? The relationships here are striking: European public service media spent most of their time providing thematic rather than episodic coverage, while commercial media in Europe and the U.S. spend greater time on

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<sup>283</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 67.

<sup>284</sup> Frank Esser, "Dimensions of Political News Cultures: Sound Bite and Image Bite News in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 4 (2008): 412.

<sup>285</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 61.

<sup>286</sup> Peter van Aelst et al., "The Political Information Environment during Election Campaigns," in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 50-63 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 58, 62.

episodic coverage.<sup>287</sup> These variations occur systematically according to the *type* of media (public service vs. commercial) across countries, rather than according to country.

Scheduling is another important aspect of news presentations, since news programming during peak times will attract more inadvertent viewers than during times when fewer viewers overall are watching TV. European public service media schedule more news programming during peak times than the U.S. commercial media.<sup>288</sup> (This helps explain why even the most popular TV news program in the U.S. attracts only three percent of the population.)<sup>289</sup> Among European countries, those with the most public-service oriented systems offer the widest “windows of opportunity” for citizens to learn about politics, with more peak time slots devoted to news than countries with more commercialized media systems.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, within these peak-time news programs, public service media feature a greater proportion of hard versus soft news than their commercial rivals.<sup>291</sup>

#### **ix. Spreading knowledge: Public service vs. commercial media**

While the evidence clearly shows that viewers of public service media are better informed about politics than commercial media viewers, this *could* be because smarter or better-educated people disproportionately prefer public service media. Greater income equality is important as well, since political knowledge gaps between those with high and

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<sup>287</sup> Tove Brekken et al., “News Substance: The Relative Importance of Soft and De-Contextualized News,” in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 64-78 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 75.

<sup>288</sup> Curran et al., “Media System,” 19-20.

<sup>289</sup> Brekken et al., “News Substance,” 77.

<sup>290</sup> Esser et al., “Political Information Opportunities.”

<sup>291</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 73.

low levels of education are significantly smaller in more equal countries.<sup>292</sup> However, a study of 14 E.U. member states found that even after controlling for a battery of other factors (gender, education, age, income, ideology, and political interest), in 10 of 14 countries a preference for public service media was still strongly correlated with knowledge about politics.<sup>293</sup> Using statistical techniques to mimic a real-world experiment, a study of six countries representing North America, Europe, and Asia concluded that exposure to public service media increases political knowledge to a greater extent than commercial media, but only where funding and other mechanisms guaranteed public broadcasters independence.<sup>294</sup> (Commercial media produce more knowledge only where public service media are heavily influenced by government.)<sup>295</sup>

Levels of political knowledge also correlate strongly with political interest; however, in public service media systems, this correlation is far weaker than in commercial media systems. As Shanto Iyengar and colleagues explain, in commercial systems “political knowledge depends heavily upon political interest; in public service systems, however, it is possible for the less interested to overcome their motivational handicap because of the greater availability of news programming.”<sup>296</sup> The greater availability and supply of hard news in public service media systems means that those without high levels of education or political interest are inadvertently exposed to hard news, and thereby become informed

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<sup>292</sup> Kimmo Gronlund and Henry Milner, "The Determinants of Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>293</sup> Christina Holtz-Bacha and Pippa Norris, "'To Entertain, Inform, and Educate': Still the Role of Public Television," *Political Communication* 18, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>294</sup> Stuart Soroka, et al., "Auntie Knows Best? Public Broadcasters and Current Affairs Knowledge," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 04 (2013).

<sup>295</sup> Popescu and Tóka, "Public Television," 18.

<sup>296</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., "Cross-National versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information: A Media Systems Perspective," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 20, no. 3 (2010): 303.

about the political realm.<sup>297</sup> This applies with particular force to ethnic minorities: in the commercialized U.S. system, minorities are both less exposed and less knowledgeable about hard news, while in the more public service-oriented British system, there are no such gaps in knowledge between ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority.<sup>298</sup>

As discussed in previous chapters, media effects are likely to be greatest for “unobtrusive” issues, like foreign affairs,<sup>299</sup> which do not directly affect the vast majority of citizens on a day-to-day basis. Tests of international affairs knowledge have demonstrated that on average, Americans are more ignorant than the publics of all European G7 nations, and strikingly so: for instance, 57% of Americans answered only one or none of five questions correctly, while 58% of Germans answered all or four of five questions correctly.<sup>300</sup> A comparison of the U.S. and Switzerland found Americans to be significantly more ignorant about world affairs than the Swiss, and that this difference is partially attributable to the greater supply of international news in Switzerland’s public service media system.<sup>301</sup> (On some hard news questions, Swiss high school dropouts performed better than American college graduates.)<sup>302</sup> Television news in the U.S. not only provides less information about the world than European TV news, but two-thirds of it is focused on countries with heavy U.S. military or diplomatic involvement, rendering much of the rest of

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<sup>297</sup> Kyu S. Hahn et al., “Does Knowledge of Hard News Go With Knowledge of Soft News? A Cross-National Analysis of the Structure of Public Affairs Knowledge,” in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 119-137 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 135-136.

<sup>298</sup> Curran et al., “Media System,” 17-21.

<sup>299</sup> As Walter Lippmann noted, foreign affairs can be a terribly difficult topic to cover accurately, particularly in conflict zones: “the plain fact is that out of the troubled areas of the world the public receives practically nothing that is not propaganda. Lenin and his enemies control all the news there is of Russia, and no court of law would accept any of the testimony as valid in a suit to determine the possession of a donkey.” (Lippmann, 2012, 30)

<sup>300</sup> Michael Dimock and Samuel L. Popkin, “Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective,” in *Do the Media Govern*, ed. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves, 217-224 (London: Sage, 1997): 219.

<sup>301</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., “‘Dark Areas of Ignorance’ Revisited: Comparing International Affairs Knowledge in Switzerland and the United States,” *Communication Research* 36, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

the world invisible.<sup>303</sup> (Americans are similarly more ignorant of domestic politics than Europeans – this is again in line with the reduced provision of political information in the U.S. commercial media.)<sup>304</sup> This same pattern of more knowledge about the world following a greater supply of international news was found in a study of 11 countries across 5 continents, with more commercialized media systems performing worse than public service media systems.<sup>305</sup> What international news *does* appear in the American press<sup>306</sup> tends to be tightly constrained to the perspectives of political elites; as Mikhail Alexseev and Lance Bennett argue, this “may remove much chance for the public to become actively involved in policy issues in ways that might define new policy options, produce more informed opinions, or stimulate higher levels of citizen participation.”<sup>307</sup>

Overall, the evidence shows that public service media do a better job than commercial media in providing foreign coverage.<sup>308</sup> TV news in public service-dominated European countries offers an average of between 16 and 10 minutes of foreign coverage per day, while the two leading commercial broadcasters in the U.S. provide a combined daily total of *four* minutes.<sup>309</sup> Within European countries, public service media tend to outperform commercial media in providing foreign news. For instance, in Germany public service broadcasting covers slightly more foreign news than commercial news, but both

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<sup>303</sup> James Curran et al., “News Content, Media Consumption, and Current Affairs Knowledge,” in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 81-97 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 85.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-89.

<sup>305</sup> Toril Aalberg, et al., “International TV News, Foreign Affairs Interest and Public Knowledge: A Comparative Study of Foreign News Coverage and Public Opinion in 11 Countries,” *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>306</sup> This study was limited to analyzing content in leading newspapers; however, as discussed earlier, the top U.S. newspapers largely set the agenda for other newspapers and TV news.

<sup>307</sup> Mikhail A. Alexseev and W. Lance Bennett, “For Whom the Gates Open: News Reporting and Government Source Patterns in the United States, Great Britain, and Russia,” *Political Communication* 12, no. 4 (1995): 409

<sup>308</sup> Curran et al., “Media System,” 11-12.

<sup>309</sup> Brekken et al., “News Substance,” 74.

provide better presentations than the U.S. commercial media.<sup>310</sup> However, there is a pattern present throughout national media systems to present international news from an “ego-centric,” national perspective that concentrates only on domestic and foreign elites.<sup>311</sup> Although some have argued that the U.S. media provides such limited coverage because Americans are less educated and familiar with the rest of the world, Christian Kolmer and Holli Semetko rightly ask: “But what came first – the lack of education or the lack of information in US television news?”<sup>312</sup> Most likely, it is the lack of information. Levels of *interest* in international news<sup>313</sup> are high in the U.S., more so than many other countries with a greater supply of international news.<sup>314</sup> However, there is a glaring mismatch between what news editors choose to cover and what the public wants.<sup>315</sup> Even if – in a counterfactual world – U.S. audiences actually preferred what they are currently being offered, this would not provide justification for low levels of foreign news reporting. As Cass Sunstein explains, without access to an alternate media system, “the broadcasting status quo cannot, without circularity, be justified on the basis of [current] preferences. Preferences that have adapted to an objectionable system cannot justify that system.”<sup>316</sup> After all, if more copious, broader, and diverse foreign news were regularly offered, audiences may eventually develop a preference for it,<sup>317</sup> as seems to be the case in

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<sup>310</sup> Christian Kolmer and Holli A. Semetko, "International Television News: Germany Compared," *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 5 (2010).

<sup>311</sup> Hafez, *The Myth*, 24-39

<sup>312</sup> Kolmer and Semetko, "International Television," 712.

<sup>313</sup> Americans have an even greater preference for *good* news from around the world. (Hargrove and Stempel, 2002)

<sup>314</sup> Aalberg et al., "International TV News," 397.

<sup>315</sup> Zixue Tai and Tsan-Kuo Chang, "The Global News and the Pictures in Their Heads: A Comparative Analysis of Audience Interest, Editor Perceptions and Newspaper Coverage," *International Communication Gazette* 64, no. 3 (2002).

<sup>316</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 74.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

European countries with public service media systems. The opposite also holds: when the supply of international news is reduced, so is interest in international news.<sup>318</sup> In any case, it makes little sense to think of American or any other culture as stable and unchanging, with fixed preferences the media can only adapt to but not influence.<sup>319</sup>

Interestingly, differences between commercial and public service media in coverage of particular issues have been found to affect opinions. Such effects have been found on the issue of immigration, currently a hot topic in the U.S. and Europe. Europeans who primarily watch commercial TV news have stronger anti-immigration views, while those who watch public broadcasts are less opposed; this correlation remains significant even after controlling for education, age, gender, and political interest.<sup>320</sup> The likely explanation? On commercial channels, immigration coverage tends to be sensationalistic, with immigrants treated as a threat, while public television provides more information and a better balanced picture.<sup>321</sup>

Perhaps the most important kind of political knowledge for democratic citizens is where political parties stand on the ideological spectrum, and what sorts of policies they might implement if their candidates were elected. In a study of five European countries and the U.S., viewers of public television news in four of the five European countries were better able to correctly place their countries' parties on a political position scale than viewers of commercial TV news; surprisingly, U.S. viewers of commercial TV news were no

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<sup>318</sup> Bollinger, *Uninhibited*, 85.

<sup>319</sup> Williams, *Communications*, 106.

<sup>320</sup> Zan Strabac et al., "News Consumption and Public Opposition to Immigration across Countries," in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 176-188 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 182-183.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

better than non-viewers at placing their (two) political parties on a political position scale.<sup>322</sup>

Exposure to public service media has been shown to correlate with both political knowledge and trust in the political system, even after controlling for education.<sup>323</sup>

Exposure to commercial media, on the other hand, has mixed results, and its effects disappear or diminish when education is included in the analysis. Interestingly, this study found that exposure to U.S. commercial TV news may even *decrease* political knowledge, while at the same time increasing trust in the (poorly-understood) political system.<sup>324</sup>

Since greater knowledge is associated with greater political participation, it makes sense that more informative forms of media produce higher rates of political participation. A comprehensive study of 74 democracies found that countries with public service media systems had higher levels of voting than countries with commercialized media systems. For every 1% increase in audience share for public broadcasting, there is a .15% increase in voter turnout – and among advanced democracies, a .21% increase.<sup>325</sup> Greater density of media options is also correlated with *correct* voting across dozens of countries.<sup>326</sup> Political and ideological pluralism in the media system as a whole also produces more political participation, particularly for newspapers but also for television.<sup>327</sup> Here, a democratic goal

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<sup>322</sup> Anders Todal Jensen et al., "Informed Citizens, Media Use, and Public Knowledge of Parties' Policy Positions," in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 138-158 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 152, 155.

<sup>323</sup> Kees Aarts et al., "Media, Political Trust, and Political Knowledge," In *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 98-188 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 113-117.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 112-114; Kees Aarts, email message to author, May 21, 2015.

<sup>325</sup> Mijeong Baek, "A Comparative Analysis of Political Communication Systems and Voter Turnout," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (2009): 383-384.

<sup>326</sup> Lau, Richard R., Parina Patel, Dalia F. Fahmy, and Robert R. Kaufman, "Correct Voting Across Thirty-Three Democracies: A Preliminary Analysis," *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>327</sup> Hetty van Kempen, "Media-Party Parallelism and Its Effects: A Cross-National Comparative Study," *Political Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007).



in and of itself – a broad, pluralistic media system – serves as an effective means to another vital democratic goal, the participation of all citizens in democratic decision-making.

In conclusion, public service media systems outperform commercial media systems across the board<sup>328</sup> – even on the internet.<sup>329</sup> Public service media systems are better at providing hard news, better at covering elections, and better at producing a knowledgeable citizenry that votes.<sup>330</sup> Public service media also tend to be more trusted,<sup>331</sup> and to provide broader and more critical coverage of politics.<sup>332</sup> The only area where public service media systems do not have a clear lead over commercial media systems is in coverage of foreign war and conflict – at least insofar as studies of Iraq war coverage have found.<sup>333</sup> Still, while during wartime both types of media too “often function as nothing less than ‘critique filters’, catching much of the material that might shake accustomed perspectives on world politics,”<sup>334</sup> the BBC opened its critical eye once the war started, at least – unlike its commercial competitors.<sup>335</sup> The public service media systems of France and Germany also did comparatively well.<sup>336</sup>

The evidence is even stronger when considered in light of the fact that Americans report higher average levels of interest in politics *and* closer attention to both domestic and international news than Europeans.<sup>337</sup> Why then are Americans far more ignorant about

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<sup>328</sup> Toril Aalberg and James Curran, “Conclusion,” in *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach*, ed. Toril Aalberg and James Curran, 189-199 (New York: Routledge, 2012): 193.

<sup>329</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 205.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92, 122, 191.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-191.

<sup>332</sup> Rodney Benson, “Public Funding and Journalistic Independence: What Does Research Tell Us?” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 314-319 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 315-316.

<sup>333</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 147.

<sup>334</sup> Hafez, *The Myth*, 42.

<sup>335</sup> Cushion, *The Democratic Value*, 148.

<sup>336</sup> Oberg, “The Iraq Conflict,” 194.

<sup>337</sup> Aalberg and Curran, “Conclusion,” 195-196.

domestic and international politics than Europeans? Some factors include the greater degree of distrust Americans have for their government and their media system (and why should it be trusted?), as well as the greater degree of economic inequality in the United States.<sup>338</sup> But a large part of the explanation must be the differences between the United States' commercialized media system and Europe's public service media systems, with their heavily-funded, market-leading public broadcasters. "Thus, in [the European] system, the citizen watching a popular channel needs to actively choose to avoid information about public affairs. In the [U.S.] system, the citizen watching a popular channel needs to actively seek out this information."<sup>339</sup>

If democracy is not to be abandoned, or allowed to wither away, our media systems need to be reformed to adopt the best practices we can ascertain by studying other countries' experiences. As two legal scholars in the U.K. forcefully argue:

To date, regulation has done just enough to ensure that a 'mixed economy' of public service and commercial broadcasting now exists, though there is no doubt in which direction the tide is running. If the public service tradition is to be defended and reinvigorated, it is necessary to move beyond tacit and slightly apologetic defences of it against the market-oriented arguments, and instead argue loudly for an acceptance of the reality that *only* the public service tradition has been *proven* to guarantee the range and quality of programming and reach all sectors of society that the public interest demands. Any other, market-driven, alternatives are likely to fail

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 199.

in one or all of these respects, leading to an undermining of the public interest and, ultimately, via the erosion of citizenship, the diminishment of democracy.<sup>340</sup>

#### **x. What is to be done? Proposals for reform**

*"If the choice were to be made between Communism with all its chances, and the present state of society, with all the sufferings and injustices ... if this or Communism, were the alternatives, all the difficulties great or small of Communism would be as dust in the balance."*

- John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the U.S. media system in particular is experiencing a foundation-shaking crisis.<sup>341</sup> Newspapers are going out of business as fast as @themediaisdying can tweet about them, journalists are losing their jobs by the tens of thousands, and coverage is suffering: the U.S. news media is doing an ever more horrendous job at keeping Americans informed about the political realm both at home and abroad. Perhaps the only positive outcome the U.S. media has produced is a renaissance of political comedy – the *Daily Show*, *The Nightly Show*, *Real Time*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *Redacted Tonight* – which derive most of their laughs by lampooning the sorry state of the U.S. media.

On its own, the internet is having mixed effects: it is hurting the revenue streams of newspapers, but it is providing a pluralistic source of news and debate for those with the skill and ability to use it. However, the vast majority of news reporting on the internet

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<sup>340</sup> Mike Feintuck and Mike Varney, *Media Regulation, Public Interest and the Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006): 256-257.

<sup>341</sup> Paul Starr, "An Unexpected Crisis: The News Media in Postindustrial Democracies," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012).

comes from the same old media companies that are in crisis.<sup>342</sup> (At least on news websites; on social media and blogs, a greater diversity is on offer.)<sup>343</sup> Those who attempt to bypass old media on the internet and access alternative media find themselves in an information ecology in which they may be exposed to all sorts of junk memes and misinformation.<sup>344</sup> However, this is in comparison to legacy media outlets, which (as discussed in the previous chapter) provide the opposite ecological deficiency: an ideological monoculture (or “di-culture,” with primarily liberal perspectives on social issues and primarily conservative perspectives on economic and foreign policy issues). Hence, as Catie Snow Bailard points out,

the proper point of comparison is not the content of information online in a world where critics must compete with pro-government propaganda relative to some sort of ideal world of perfect information online that is completely free of distortion. Rather, the meaningful comparison is the sort of information that the Internet, with all its shortcomings, provides to citizens relative to the sort of information that was available for public consumption before the Internet existed.”<sup>345</sup>

While television is still the top choice for news in the U.S.,<sup>346</sup> there is a wide generation gap: nearly two thirds of Millennials get their news from internet social media, while Baby Boomers get their news (in roughly the same proportion) from local TV news.<sup>347</sup> This gap

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<sup>342</sup> McChesney, “A Real Media,” 10; McGuire, “Media Influence,” 716.

<sup>343</sup> Scott Maier, “All the News Fit to Post? Comparing News Content on the Web to Newspapers, Television, and Radio,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87, no. 3-4 (2010).

<sup>344</sup> Delia Mocanu et al., “Collective Attention in the Age of (Mis) Information,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 51, Part B (2015).

<sup>345</sup> Catie Snow Bailard, *Democracy’s Double-Edged Sword: How Internet Use Changes Citizens’ Views of Their Government* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014): 55.

<sup>346</sup> Lydia Saad, “TV is Americans’ Main Source of News,” *Gallup* (July 8, 2013).

<sup>347</sup> Amy Mitchell et al., “Millennials and Political News: Social Media – the Local TV for the Next Generation?” Pew Research Center, *Journalism & Media* (June 1, 2015).

in media use may be a cause of ideological gaps between generations in the U.S., as demonstrated by the Bernie Sanders primary campaign.<sup>348</sup> The internet's influence on political opinions can be split into "mirror-holding" and "window-opening" effects. Mirror-holding refers to the fact that the internet "provides a larger and more diverse array of political information than the traditional media system could provide," offering a more complete picture of the political realm in one's country; and window-opening refers to the international diversity on the internet, offering a more inclusive picture of global politics and the examples other countries provide.<sup>349</sup> Not only do mirror-holding and window-opening help shape different political opinions, they can, as a recent meta-analysis found, lead to greater political engagement, particularly as internet penetration and use increase over time.<sup>350</sup>

Regardless of what internet media *may* bring in the future, presently there is a clear need for a major reform of the U.S. media system, as well as those of many other countries. This is the goal of several organizations within the U.S. (and around the world), like Free Press and Media Alliance, among several other local organizations and groups with media reform as one of multiple goals. Collectively, their goal is to democratize the media system, whether by reforming the governance structures of media outlets, creating alternative media outlets, or improving its performance through regulation to bring it closer to the level required for a functioning democratic political system.<sup>351</sup> Besides "democratizing the media," activists in this area conceive of their task as guaranteeing a free press or freedom

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<sup>348</sup> Peter Beattie, "Where Did the Bernie Sanders Movement Come From? The Internet," *Naked Capitalism* (May 25, 2016).

<sup>349</sup> Bailard, *Democracy's Double-Edged Sword*, 5.

<sup>350</sup> Shelley Boulianne, "Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research," *Political Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>351</sup> Hackett & Carroll, *Remaking Media*, 52, 65.

of expression,<sup>352</sup> upholding a right to communication, improving the cultural environment, or fighting for media justice.<sup>353</sup> A study of activists in the U.S. media democratization movement found that many are unaware that countries in Europe<sup>354</sup> have already made great strides in the direction the activists themselves are advocating.<sup>355</sup> There is, however, considerable international cooperation in the media democratization movement, and allied groups have produced a People's Communication Charter that lays out the basic principles the international movement is fighting for.<sup>356</sup>

Fighting against the media democratization movement are media corporations, their associations, and an assortment of political and intellectual allies like libertarians.<sup>357</sup> What Walter Lippmann wrote in 1920 remains relevant today: "Those who are now in control have too much at stake, and they control the source of reform itself. Change will come only by the drastic competition of those whose interests are not represented in the existing news-organization."<sup>358</sup> Luckily for the media democratization movement, journalists are quickly joining the ranks of those whose interests are not represented in the existing media system.<sup>359</sup> And from a strictly economic point of view, so are the owners of newspaper companies.

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<sup>352</sup> Those preferring the "freedom of expression" frame might do well to heed Walter Lippmann's advice: When freedom of opinion is revealed as freedom of error, illusion, and misinterpretation, it is virtually impossible to stir up much interest in its behalf. It is the thinnest of all abstractions and an over-refinement of mere intellectualism. But people, wide circles of people, are aroused when their curiosity is baulked. The desire to know, the dislike of being deceived and made game of, is a really powerful motive, and it is that motive that can best be enlisted in the cause of freedom. (Lippmann, 2012, 39)

<sup>353</sup> Hackett & Carroll, *Remaking Media*, 78-79.

<sup>354</sup> It is safe to assume that they are also unaware of the recent success similar movements have achieved in Latin America, in passing new laws and instituting new public service outlets.

<sup>355</sup> Robert Hackett and Megan Adam, "Is Media Democratization a Social Movement?" *Peace Review* 11, no. 1 (1999): 129.

<sup>356</sup> Hackett & Carroll, *Remaking Media*, 82-84; see also [www.pccharter.net](http://www.pccharter.net)

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 140; Anderson and Thierer, *A Manifesto*.

<sup>358</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*, 59-60.

<sup>359</sup> Hackett & Carroll, *Remaking Media*, 201.

The *need* for media democratization is pressing. Walter Lippmann’s 1920 prophesy – that in “a few generations it will seem ludicrous to historians that a people professing government by the will of the people should have made no serious effort to guarantee the news without which governing opinion cannot exist”<sup>360</sup> – has been proven correct. The current situation certainly seems ludicrous (for starters). We have painted ourselves into a corner by attempting to provide the public good of political information and pluralistic debate through market means; but since no individual consumer has a sufficient incentive to pay for the benefits this public good confers, collectively *we* do not pay, and the market produces insufficient information.<sup>361</sup> The only thing currently separating political information from other public goods like universal education, firefighting services, a network of roads, or protection from crime is that we have not yet come to terms with the reality that *this* public good requires public provision. Certainly, if the sorry state of the contemporary U.S. media system had been caused by government orders to fire half the nation’s journalists, replace their reporting with PR releases, close foreign bureaus, give up investigative journalism, and ignore massive financial bubbles until they pop, then we would be up in arms.<sup>362</sup> When the same result occurs through market failure instead of government fiat, however, it is harder to see the problem (or its solution) for what it is. We fear government control so much that we are blind to what Raymond Williams observed, that “the control claimed as a matter of power by authoritarians, and as a matter of principle by paternalists, is often achieved as a matter of practice in the operation of the

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<sup>360</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*, 8.

<sup>361</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 70.

<sup>362</sup> Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, “Down the News Hole,” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 103-112 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 106.

commercial system.”<sup>363</sup> Philip Pettit, hardly insensitive to the danger of government domination, acknowledged nonetheless:

It is important, first of all, that there should be many different voices in the media.

This entails that media ownership and control should not be allowed to concentrate in a few hands. And it entails that the state should set up or subsidize media that are governed by different interests from those that dominate in commercial life: it should support semi-autonomous state broadcasting services, for example, and encourage as far as possible the growth of community-based media. The state should also assume responsibility, of course, for media regulation, though the best line here will almost certainly be to encourage a serious degree of self-regulation among media organizations.<sup>364</sup>

As Todd Gitlin points out, expecting “the myopic, inept, greedy, unlucky, and floundering managers of the nation’s newspapers to rescue journalism on their own would be like leaving it to the investment wizards at the American International Group (AIG), Citibank, and Goldman Sachs, to create a workable, just global credit system on the strength of their goodwill, their hard-earned knowledge, and their fidelity to the public good.”<sup>365</sup> What we need from our media system – full political information and pluralism – is in economic terms an *externality* of media companies’ operations, and goes beyond and sometimes against these companies’ rational, profit-maximizing considerations.<sup>366</sup> As self-

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<sup>363</sup> Williams, *Communications*, 133.

<sup>364</sup> Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 169.

<sup>365</sup> Todd Gitlin, “A Surfeit of Crises: Circulation, Revenue, Attention, Authority, and Deference,” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 91-102 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 102.

<sup>366</sup> Fu, “Applying,” 278.



regulation has demonstrably failed, the only remaining option is government intervention.

Pascual Serrano writes:

We are faced with a new challenge: to find a way for citizens to reclaim our right to information *through* the State, *from* which we need to demand the enforcement of its duty to guarantee it. We, citizens, must give power to the State, and the State, for its part, must give us control. This is the true freedom of the press in a democracy.<sup>367</sup>

What we need are practical proposals that democracies can implement now, which describe precisely what sort of power to give to the State, and how we will control it.

Without these, even the most convincing critiques of the status quo are unlikely to have any effect.<sup>368</sup>

Such proposals will doubtless draw the ire of libertarians, and those worried that any change to the current U.S. media system will eliminate rightwing voices from the airwaves.<sup>369</sup> But their concerns that media “consumers” will lose their freedom to “consume” whatever information they want from any source they choose, that the “dazzling cornucopia” of modern media will be destroyed, and that citizens will lose their freedom to speak their minds, are entirely unfounded. The proposals of the media democratization movement would leave these freedoms not only untouched but *enhanced*. Only the freedom of media “creators” to “structure their business affairs as they wish” would be limited – but *less* than this freedom is currently limited by the invisible hand of the market. The proper response to such concerns was articulated by Raymond Williams half a century ago:

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<sup>367</sup> Serrano, “Democracia,” 82, translation and emphasis mine.

<sup>368</sup> Sparks, “Civil Society,” 42-43.

<sup>369</sup> Anderson & Thierer, *A Manifesto*, xii-xiii, 21, 106.

[W]e are deeply confused in thinking about possible alternatives: partly by the propaganda of the existing groups, who insist very loudly that freedom for them is freedom for everybody; and partly by the genuine difficulties of any public cultural system. We have been reduced to making contrasts between the speculator and the bureaucrat, and wondering which is the blacker devil. The real barrier, perhaps, is that we see these as the only alternatives. ... [But there is an alternative:] Where the means of communication can be personally owned, it is the duty of society to guarantee this ownership and to ensure that distribution facilities are adequate, on terms compatible with the original freedom. Where the means of communication cannot be personally owned, because of their expense and size, it is the duty of society to hold these means in trust for the actual contributors, who for all practical purposes will control their use.<sup>370</sup>

First, we must recognize that the news media is already a *de facto* fourth branch of government in modern societies.<sup>371</sup> It is a true “Moderating Power,” taking over the role of the king or emperor in a constitutional monarchy by checking and balancing the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.<sup>372</sup> As argued by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, the “primary purpose of the constitutional guarantee of a free press” was “to create a fourth institution outside the Government as an additional check on the three official branches.”<sup>373</sup> This purpose has been achieved. The media does provide a check on

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<sup>370</sup> Williams, *Communications*, 170-171.

<sup>371</sup> Cristians and Nordenstreng, “Social Responsibility,” 18; Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 96.

<sup>372</sup> de Albuquerque, “Another ‘Fourth Branch’”; de Albuquerque, “On Models,” 89-90.

<sup>373</sup> Potter Stewart, “Or of the Press,” *Hastings Law Journal* 26 (1974-1975): 634.

the official branches of government – politicians the world over fear, or at least respect, the power of the media, and shape their actions accordingly.<sup>374</sup>

Second, we should be reminded that a large part of the media system is already publicly owned. The airwaves required for radio and television broadcasters, and the postal system required for newspapers and magazines, are public property. The infrastructure and basic investment for satellites, fiber optic networks, and the internet was provided by public funding. Companies seeking to use public property, or profit from public investments, are obliged to abide by whatever restrictions the public chooses to impose. With these basic principles in mind, let us review a number of proposals to reform and democratize the media system.

### **Five media sectors**

James Curran has sketched the contours of an ideal, democratic media system: it would be centered on a well-funded, independent public service media core, which would be bolstered by media outlets in the private, civic, social market, and professional sectors.<sup>375</sup> The private sector would remain largely independent, and would continue to cater to audience demands, but it would be subject to the best regulations from European experience to prevent it from subverting the public core of the system, and to ensure journalists' autonomy. The civic sector would comprise media outlets run by organized political groups, from parties to activist organizations, and would be funded by government grants along the Dutch model. The social market sector would consist of ethnic and political

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<sup>374</sup> See, e.g., Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 93-94.

<sup>375</sup> Curran, *Media and Power*, 240-247.

minority media outlets supported by state funds, modeled on the Scandinavian experience, to ensure the widest possible diversity and pluralism in the media system as a whole. The professional sector would be loosely modeled on the BBC (or al-Jazeera); it would comprise one television and one radio station funded completely by the government, hire experienced journalists, and operate completely free of regulation and commercial pressure. The public service media core of the system would be modeled on German public television, which ensures that all significant groups in society have the opportunity to provide their perspectives in all forms of programming. Essential to any such design is decentralization and democratic control split between citizens and journalists themselves.<sup>376</sup>

### **Constitutional changes**

Many proposals for democratizing the media may require constitutional changes. Amendments could be made that grant government the positive power to provide for the intellectual needs of citizens in a free society,<sup>377</sup> or which enshrine a right of citizens to communicate through the media,<sup>378</sup> along the lines of the “right to information” in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>379</sup> Although the current First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly grant such a positive power, legal scholar Jerome Barron has argued that this constitutional “provision preventing government from silencing or dominating opinion should not be confused with an *absence* of governmental

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<sup>376</sup> Garnham, *Structure of Television*, 44-45.

<sup>377</sup> W. H. Ferry, "Masscomm as Educator," *The American Scholar* 35, no. 2 (1966): 301.

<sup>378</sup> Seán Ó. Siochrú, "Finding a Frame: Toward a Transnational Advocacy Campaign to Democratize Communication," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 289-311 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 303.

<sup>379</sup> Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 176.

power to require that opinion be voiced.”<sup>380</sup> The Supreme Court has held that it “would be strange indeed ... if the grave concern for freedom of the press which prompted adoption of the First Amendment should be read as a command that the government was without power to protect that freedom.”<sup>381</sup> And in another case, the Supreme Court elaborated that it “is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount. It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail...”<sup>382</sup> However, the Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment has not been consistently clear in affirming the power of the government to ensure that such a marketplace of ideas is functioning, or to intervene in the case of market failure.<sup>383</sup> Therefore, at least in the United States there is a potential need for a constitutional amendment to explicitly grant the government power to ensure that the marketplace of ideas is functioning, to provide for the information needs of the citizenry, and to undergird the right to communicate through the media.

## **Press councils**

Sweden was the first country to institute a press council: an organization composed mostly of journalists that is tasked with receiving and investigating complaints from the public about how the media system or individual outlets are operating, and issuing recommendations and reports on their investigations.<sup>384</sup> Since Sweden’s press council was

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<sup>380</sup> Barron, “Access to the Press,” 1676, emphasis mine.

<sup>381</sup> *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1 (1945): 20.

<sup>382</sup> *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 395 U.S. 367 (1969): 390.

<sup>383</sup> Marjorie Heins and Eric M. Freedman, “Foreword: Reclaiming the First Amendment: Constitutional Theories of Media Reform,” *Hofstra Law Review* 35 (2007): 924-928.

<sup>384</sup> Roger Simpson, “Our Single Remedy for All Ills’ The History of the Idea of a National Press Council,” *American Journalism* 12, no. 4 (1995): 478.

instituted in 1916, over a dozen countries have followed suit. As Kai Hafez writes of the means by which the German media system is subjected to institutionalized, continuous evaluation, press councils are key “components of the regulation of modern broadcasting, which is flexible but also entails increased checks and balances.”<sup>385</sup>

Attempts were made to institute a press council in the United States as well, but communications scholar Roger Simpson explains that “the communications industries apparently saw a great danger in independent appraisal; they fought the foe as though their lives depended on it, a degree of commitment the advocates of a national press council failed to emulate.”<sup>386</sup> As a result of pressure from the news industry, which smeared the proposal as a Communist plot (either cynically, or with earnest and staggering ignorance), the United States today lacks a press council.

Instituting press councils where they are currently lacking can be seen as an initial step in the movement for media democratization, a way of creating a “fifth power” to balance and check the fourth power of the media until it is brought under direct democratic control.<sup>387</sup> Another Swedish innovation, the ombudsman, can serve as a model for a *global* press council or “Ombudsoffice” for communication and cultural rights.<sup>388</sup> An “International Office of the Ombudsperson for Cultural Rights” has been proposed as an independent agency of the United Nations, to hear complaints from individuals and groups around the world about deficiencies in their national media systems. The Ombudsoffice

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<sup>385</sup> Hafez, *The Myth*, 124.

<sup>386</sup> Simpson, “Our Single Remedy,” 495.

<sup>387</sup> Ignacio Ramonet, “Meios de Comunicação: um Poder a Serviço de Interesses Privados?” in *Mídia, Poder e Contrapoder: da Concentração Monopólica À Democratização da Informação*, ed. Dênis de Moraes, 53-70 (São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2013): 99.

<sup>388</sup> Cees J. Hamelink, “The Civil Society Challenge to Global Media Policy,” in *Global Media Policy in the New Millennium*, ed. Mark Raboy, 251-260 (New Barnet UK: University of Luton Press, 2002): 259-260.

could then investigate complaints, collect data, issue reports, and make recommendations for legal remedies. Smaller, local ombudsoffices could be instituted at the regional level to monitor the performance of local media outlets.<sup>389</sup> Borrowing from the U.S. jury system,<sup>390</sup> local press councils or ombudsoffices could experiment with randomly drawing members from the community, tasking them with investigating complaints and deliberating on them, and investing them with power to issue legally binding directives to local media outlets that fail to serve the public interest.

### **Changing journalistic professionalism**

Another way to improve media systems is to change the training and culture of journalists themselves. Walter Lippmann advocated for a scientific paradigm of journalism: “because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues. They are the habits of ascribing no more credibility to a statement than it warrants, a nice sense of the probabilities, and a keen understanding of the quantitative importance of particular facts.”<sup>391</sup> His conception also borrowed from the legal profession,<sup>392</sup> advocating for treatises on the use of evidence in news reporting similar to those used in courts of law.<sup>393</sup> By tasking journalists with attempting to verify the claims of

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<sup>389</sup> Comparato, “Prefácio,” 17.

<sup>390</sup> Bruce Ackerman, “Reviving Democratic Citizenship?” *Politics & Society* 41, no. 2 (2013): 311.

<sup>391</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*, 49.

<sup>392</sup> Lippmann also saw a role for political scientists to play:

[T]he universities could be brought into such a scheme. Were they in close contact with the current record and analysis, there might well be a genuine ‘field work’ in political science for the students; and there could be no better directing idea for their more advanced researches than the formulation of the intellectual methods by which the experience of government could be brought to usable control. After all, the purpose of studying ‘political science’ is to be able to act more effectively in politics, the word effectively being understood in the largest and, therefore, the ideal sense. In the universities men should be able to think patiently and generously for the good of society. If they do not, surely one of the reasons is that thought terminates in doctor’s theses and brown quarterlies, and not in the critical issues of politics.” (Lippmann, 2012, 56-57)

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

political elites just as scientists attempt to verify hypotheses, a revamped professional journalism could overcome the “contradiction between media-centered professionalism and citizen-centered ethics.”<sup>394</sup>

Lippmann’s conception of a more scientific form of journalism overlaps considerably with the modern conception of “public journalism.” Public journalism is a paradigm which considers journalists as fair-minded referees, not mere observers or stenographers to the powerful.<sup>395</sup> Instead of achieving objectivity by balancing one partisan official’s opinion with another’s, public journalism “avoids partisan interests by disregarding the realities of political power and by appealing instead to a republican ideal which locates politics in a common discussion open and accessible to all interested citizens.”<sup>396</sup> In practice, the current conception of professional journalism in the U.S. most often means that only the views of the two parties with real political power are presented in the media. The alternative, public journalism conception would ignore such “realities of political power” and seek out additional views from social groups and scholars in addition to those currently enjoying political power. A broader assortment of political actors should be covered, including business interests and their lobbyists.<sup>397</sup> Although some conceptions of public journalism tend toward the overly romantic and impractical,<sup>398</sup> this more limited conception, in line with Lippmann’s scientific journalism, points the way toward the

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<sup>394</sup> Christians and Nordenstreng, “Social Responsibility,” 19.

<sup>395</sup> Theodore Lewis Glasser, “The Idea of Public Journalism,” in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, ed. Theodore Lewis Glasser, 3-18 (New York: Guilford Press, 1999): 7-8.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>397</sup> Schudson, *The Power of News*, 219-220.

<sup>398</sup> John Durham Peters, “Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges,” in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, ed. Theodore Lewis Glasser, 99-117 (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).



contribution a new form of journalistic professionalism can make to democratizing the media.

### **Alternative media**

Media outlets outside of the state and private sectors, usually run on a volunteer basis and financed by donations, and typically serving political or ethnic minority communities, are referred to as “alternative media.” These comprise what in James Curran’s five-sector model is called the social market sector, and they are an essential provider of diversity and pluralism for the media system overall. They typically operate on a shoestring budget, one poor fundraising drive away from financial ruin. In India, for example, alternative media are reliant on grants from NGOs and foundations, which can be just as perilous.<sup>399</sup> But in exchange, they get to enjoy greater independence; as Marx wrote, “The primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade.”<sup>400</sup>

In the United States and Europe, alternative media outlets began to flourish in the 1960s and ‘70s during a wave of media democratization efforts. While they never reached a large portion of the population, they nonetheless played a crucial role in sustaining and spreading the reach of movements for women’s rights and environmental protection, among others. With the emergence of the internet, a second wave of alternative media development has begun.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Saima Saeed, "Negotiating Power: Community Media, Democracy, and the Public Sphere," *Development in Practice* 19, no. 4-5 (2009): 475.

<sup>400</sup> Marx, "On Freedom," 40.

<sup>401</sup> Nico Carpentier et al., "Waves of Media Democratization: A Brief History of Contemporary Participatory Practices in the Media Sphere," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19, no. 3 (2013).

State funding can play a key role in sustaining and expanding existing alternative media outlets, and allowing new ones to form. Whether financed via subsidies on the Scandinavian model, or via grants along the U.S. National Institutes of Health model, these media can be enlarged to play a greater role within the media system overall. They make a vital contribution to the pluralism and diversity of debate in the modern, mediatized public sphere.

## **Subsidies**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States had the highest levels of government subsidies for the media in the world; today, they are among the lowest.<sup>402</sup> These subsidies came in the form of artificially low postal rates (George Washington even wanted postal fees eliminated entirely for the press), tax breaks, and government advertising.<sup>403</sup> It is important to remember, as Victor Pickard writes, that “[d]espite a general knee-jerk reaction against the notion—particularly among journalists for whom it is ingrained that government should never get involved in media—the government has *always* been involved in media.”<sup>404</sup> Large-scale government subsidies continue in the U.S. today, in the form of free or reduced cost licenses to use the public airwaves, monopoly privileges for satellite and cable companies, and the entire copyright system – but these subsidies are largely unknown to the public, and they come with no strings attached to maintain any

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<sup>402</sup> Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Geert Linnebank, "Public Support for the Media: A Six-Country Overview of Direct and Indirect Subsidies," Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2011): 17.

<sup>403</sup> Geoffrey Cowan and David Westphal, "The Washington-Madison Solution," in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 133-137 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 133.

<sup>404</sup> Victor Pickard, "Can Government Support the Press? Historicizing and Internationalizing a Policy Approach to the Journalism Crisis," *The Communication Review* 14, no. 2 (2011): 79.

standard of journalism.<sup>405</sup> On the other hand, European countries tie their media subsidies to a variety of public interest regulations, from restrictions on advertising to requirements on providing political and educational programming.<sup>406</sup>

Several European countries offer direct subsidies to specific types of newspapers. Finland subsidizes newspapers in minority languages, France subsidizes certain newspaper modernization projects, and Italy subsidizes newspapers published by cooperatives of journalists and local television and radio stations' investments in news.<sup>407</sup> Sweden's newspaper subsidies are targeted at struggling smaller newspapers, and these subsidies have proven successful in preventing the rise of one-newspaper cities while assuring diversity and pluralism in the Swedish press.<sup>408</sup> Norway's experience with subsidizing newspapers shows that subsidies help curb concentration, and subsidized newspapers in Norway have produced more original news stories than unsubsidized papers.<sup>409</sup> These sorts of subsidies can soften the impact of economic downturns, and they are precisely targeted at supporting news production rather than the full range of any given media company's products.<sup>410</sup> Subsidies, along with the fact that European newspaper companies tend to be family-owned, small, and not publicly traded, have helped the European press avoid the worst of the crisis currently affecting American newspapers.<sup>411</sup> There is no evidence that these subsidies have weakened their recipients'

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<sup>405</sup> Robert W. McChesney and Robert A Hackett, "Beyond Wiggle Room: American Corporate Media's Democratic Deficit, Its Global Implications, and Prospects for Reform," in *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 225-244 (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005): 226.

<sup>406</sup> Núria Almirón et al., "The Regulation of Public Broadcasters' News Coverage of Political Actors in Ten European Union Countries," *Comunicación y Sociedad* 23, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>407</sup> Nielsen and Linnebank, "Public Support," 15.

<sup>408</sup> Pickard, "Can Government," 80.

<sup>409</sup> Benson and Powers, "Public Media," 50.

<sup>410</sup> Nielsen and Linnebank, "Public Support," 24.

<sup>411</sup> Pickard, "Can Government," 81.

commitment to being government watchdogs – in fact, the available evidence suggests that subsidies strengthen their recipients’ watchdog role.<sup>412</sup> This can be guaranteed by conditioning subsidies on complete editorial autonomy for journalists, as Norway and the Netherlands have done.<sup>413</sup>

The government can also subsidize journalists directly, reducing media outlets’ labor costs by paying a portion of their salaries, or one-time retention bonuses for new hires who work for a given amount of time.<sup>414</sup> This idea has already been implemented in the Netherlands.<sup>415</sup> It would blunt commercial pressures to reduce the quality and amount of journalism by ensuring that the single greatest cost of providing it – journalists’ salaries – is artificially low. A simpler, more direct proposal based on a model proven to work in the United States would be a journalism division of AmeriCorps.<sup>416</sup> In this proposal, unemployed or young journalists would be paid a salary to find a media outlet willing to employ their talents for free. This program could be limited to nonprofit outlets, in order to prevent public funds from being diverted into private profits.<sup>417</sup>

Both forms of subsidies could be implemented together. Direct subsidies could be directed to those (print or online) newspapers in danger of bankruptcy, providing diverse political perspectives, or targeting underserved segments of the population, like ethnic minorities or demographics undesired by advertisers. Subsidies for journalists themselves

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<sup>412</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing*, 162-163.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>414</sup> Blethen & Blethen, “Wall Street-Based,” 199.

<sup>415</sup> Nielsen and Linnebank, “Public Support,” 26.

<sup>416</sup> McChesney, “A Real Media,” 26.

<sup>417</sup> Or, this could be allowed – as Germany has done with success for its firms, and as the U.S. and many other countries do indirectly through food assistance programs and the like. All of these examples involve public funds lowering businesses’ cost of employing workers.

could be provided for new hires, making newsroom expansion less expensive and ensuring that quality journalism continues to be produced.

### **Ownership restrictions**

Most European countries have special legal restrictions on media ownership,<sup>418</sup> while in many other countries media ownership is restricted in undifferentiated fashion through antimonopoly laws. These restrictions prevent excess concentration in media ownership, to avoid the possibility that a few politically-motivated media moguls could exert undue influence on public opinion through their media empires. While laudable in themselves, these ownership restrictions could go farther. The ownership of news media outlets could be reorganized under the stewardship model, as ownership of land in national parks is in Britain.<sup>419</sup> Under this conception, owners enjoy control of their property, but their control must be exercised mainly for the benefit of the public, under the guidance of a planning authority that adjudicates conflicts of interest between owners and the public. The authority monitoring stewards within the media system must be directly accountable to the electorate, and must preserve the editorial independence of journalists.<sup>420</sup>

Alternately, news media companies could be refused corporate status (and corporations could be enjoined from owning news media outlets), and required to organize under other forms, like associations, foundations, benefit corporations, or nonprofits.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Cees J. Hamelink, *Preserving Media Independence: Regulatory Frameworks* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1999).

<sup>419</sup> Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*, 273-274.

<sup>420</sup> Fenton, "Deregulation," 70.

<sup>421</sup> Comparato, "Prefácio," 17.

Their boards of directors should be directly elected by the journalists working for them. Organizing the news media in this manner would not only shield journalists from corrupting commercial influences, but also help to make subsidies or direct government funding more politically palatable by preventing (or reducing, in the case of B corporations) public funds from fueling private profits.

## **Vouchers**

The economist Dean Baker has proposed an innovative way of democratizing the media through market mechanisms: the voucher.<sup>422</sup> Each citizen (or every taxpayer) would be given the authority to allocate \$100 in “citizenship news vouchers” to the news outlet of their choice, whether online, in print, on television, or on radio.<sup>423</sup> These vouchers could be used to finance startup enterprises as well, operating like popular crowdfunding platforms: a group of journalists could pitch an idea for a news outlet, and if enough citizens decide to allocate their vouchers to the project, they would receive the necessary funding. The recipients of voucher funding could be limited to nonprofits, or at the very least required to abstain from all forms of advertising. In this manner, established commercial enterprises could continue to produce journalism alongside the new voucher-funded media. A small-scale, experimental version of this voucher system has been implemented, with positive results.<sup>424</sup>

The overall cost of such a program in the U.S. would be about \$30 billion, which is roughly equivalent to the amount the U.S. would spend on public media if it matched the

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<sup>422</sup> Dean Baker, "The Artistic Freedom Voucher: An Internet Age Alternative to Copyrights" (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2003).

<sup>423</sup> McChesney & Nichols, "Down the News," 111-112.

<sup>424</sup> Mark Latham, "Experiments in Voter Funded Media" (2012).

per capita spending of Western European countries and Japan.<sup>425</sup> The cost would also be equivalent to the amount the U.S. would spend if it subsidized journalism to the same extent that it did in the 1840s, proportional to GDP.<sup>426</sup> To put this figure in further perspective, \$30 billion is what U.S. banks make every year on overdraft fees,<sup>427</sup> and is less than a tenth of the cost of the F-35 fighter jet program.<sup>428</sup>

An alternate proposal by Bruce Ackerman would be restricted to the internet, and would require that all online news articles include a button readers could click if they found that the article contributed to their political understanding.<sup>429</sup> Data from the websites would be collected by a National Endowment for Journalism, and grants would be allocated to all participating news outlets in proportion to how many readers' clicks they collected. Both the internet and citizen news voucher ideas could prevent fraud and abuse through either regulation or by requiring a certain percentage of votes to approve each funding decision.<sup>430</sup> Also, these market-based proposals are more amenable to conservatives and libertarians<sup>431</sup> than many others, as they share much in common with the idea of education vouchers currently in vogue on the Right in the United States.

## Public funding

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<sup>425</sup> McChesney and Nichols, "Down the News," 111.

<sup>426</sup> McChesney, "A Real Media," 18.

<sup>427</sup> Ben Steverman, "Bank Fees: With 'Protection' Like This, Who Needs Enemies?" *Bloomberg Business* (July 31, 2014).

<sup>428</sup> Kathleen Miller et al., "Flawed F-35 Too Big to Kill as Lockheed Hooks 45 States," *Bloomberg Business* (February 22, 2013).

<sup>429</sup> Bruce Ackerman, "One Click Away: The Case for the Internet News Voucher." in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 299-305 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 304-305; Ackerman, "Reviving."

<sup>430</sup> Mark Latham, "Voter-Funded Media: Governance Reform for Democracies and Corporations" (2007).

<sup>431</sup> Or *should be*, at least. Some scholars have criticized media voucher proposals from a libertarian perspective, but their argument evinces a lack of familiarity with the scholarship in this area, particularly regarding the public good nature of media information and the current state and performance of the U.S. media system. (Thierer and Szoka, 2010, 5)

As Bree Nordenson wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “[t]o survive, journalism and journalists need to let go of their aversion to Uncle Sam.”<sup>432</sup> The commercial news media system has failed demonstrably to provide good journalism, and the only possible source of the funds required to provide it is the government. Foundation-supported journalism is not a viable alternative, as the total amount of national and local foundation grants for journalism in the U.S. from 2005 to 2009 was \$128 million, while the budget for *The New York Times* alone is \$200 million *per year*.<sup>433</sup> While there are good theoretical reasons for journalists’ aversion to government funding, in the real world the experiences of many countries demonstrate that it is possible to provide public funding for a media system without muffling the watchdog’s bark.<sup>434</sup> In fact, in 2011 *The Economist’s* “Democracy Index” ranked 18 nations ahead of the United States; the majority of these countries’ governments fund their media systems at least 10 to 20 times as much as the U.S., on a per capita basis.<sup>435</sup> As Tom Ferguson describes his “Golden Rule” as it applies to the provision of information in democracies: “In politics, you get what you pay for. Or someone else does.”<sup>436</sup> The alternative to government as sugar daddy is not free sugar; influence will instead come from private sources more difficult to bring under democratic control.

In any use of public funding for the media, care must be taken to preserve journalistic independence. Many means can be used to achieve this goal, starting with the separation of government officials from journalists working for publicly-funded media. All

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<sup>432</sup> Bree Nordenson, “The Uncle Sam Solution: Can the Government Help the Press? Should It?” *Columbia Journalism Review* 46, no. 3 (2007): 41.

<sup>433</sup> Pickard, “Can Government,” 78-79.

<sup>434</sup> See, e.g., Benson and Powers, “Public Media.”

<sup>435</sup> McChesney, “A Real,” 20-21.

<sup>436</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 355.



public service media outlets should be organized as independent organizations governed by boards elected by journalists themselves.<sup>437</sup> Government funding for journalism could be routed through local funding boards manned by journalists, who would then make funding decisions for the locality.<sup>438</sup> This would help insulate journalists from potential political interference. Government grants to journalism could also be modeled on the currently-existing (and successful) system of government grants for scientific and medical research.<sup>439</sup> An expanded, competitively-funded Public Broadcasting Corporation could be split into several organizations each under the directorship of various public sectors: political parties, public interest groups, and social groups.<sup>440</sup> News media assets of media conglomerates and private equity firms could be purchased by the government at fair market value, and provided with the staff, funding, and independence they require to be more than an investor's cash cow – a role they are not very good at, in any case. In Victor Pickard's words, this would be a way for society to "rescue good assets from bad owners."<sup>441</sup>

Optimally, such public funding schemes would be operated and implemented globally, at least in part. In fact, in order to work at all they will at least have to take the global level into account.<sup>442</sup> No country's media system is exclusively national, but is always to a greater or lesser extent inclusive of other countries' media outlets, particularly in the internet age. Global funding schemes would help provide the international cooperation and

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<sup>437</sup> Williams, *Communications*, 174-175.

<sup>438</sup> Gitlin, "A Surfeit," 101.

<sup>439</sup> Bollinger, *Uninhibited*, 133.

<sup>440</sup> Bennett, *News*, 281.

<sup>441</sup> Pickard, "Revisiting," 183.

<sup>442</sup> Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*, 254.

exchange that is sorely lacking in the global media system overall.<sup>443</sup> It would also allow for cost savings in maintaining (or rather reestablishing) foreign bureaus, with media outlets relying on sister outlets around the world for foreign perspectives on international issues. If we can have a branch of New York University in Abu Dhabi, why not a noncompetitive, noncommercial global network of public media outlets?

The sharp increases in funding these proposals would require can come from several possible sources.<sup>444</sup> A consumer electronics tax, spectrum use fees for commercial broadcasters on the public airwaves, spectrum auctions, a sales tax on advertisers, and reducing the tax deductibility of advertising are some of the ways improvements in the media system can be funded.<sup>445</sup> The last four sources of funds are all essentially ways of requiring the commercial media to subsidize the public media<sup>446</sup> – which we, as owners of the airwaves and rightful participants in the public sphere, have every right to require. Also worth remembering is that the total cost of funding the *newspaper* component of the media system will drop by at least *half* simply by transitioning print newspapers to the internet.<sup>447</sup>

## License fee funding

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<sup>443</sup> Hafez, *The Myth*, 148.

<sup>444</sup> Leaving aside here important questions, discussed in modern monetary theory, about the very concept of funding limitations in countries with sovereign fiat currencies and floating exchange rates.

<sup>445</sup> Craig Aaron, “Public Media to the Rescue?” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 340-350 (New York: The New Press 2011): 347-348

<sup>446</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 88.

<sup>447</sup> Mark Cooper, “The Future of Journalism: Addressing Pervasive Market Failure with Public Policy,” in *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It*, ed. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, 320-339 (New York: The New Press, 2011): 335-336.

♪ *I've got food in my belly and a license for my telly / And nothing's gonna bring me down*♪

- Paolo Nutini, "Pencil Full of Lead"

In Britain, where Paolo Nutini hails from, funding for Britain's public service media outlet (the BBC) is provided by a television license fee of around £135 per household, which generates nearly three billion pounds of revenue annually.<sup>448</sup> Germany and the Scandinavian countries also assess license fees to households with televisions, which provide the majority of their public service media financing. This means of funding helps to avoid the possibility of governmental interference with the media, and establishes a direct link between citizens and their public media, providing accountability.<sup>449</sup> Hence the license fee solves the problem of undue government influence by establishing purse strings directly to the citizenry, rather than indirectly through government budgeting.

Nonetheless, the license fee can become the subject of political wrangling during parliamentary debates over increasing or decreasing it – so government influence is not entirely avoided. (Additional structural factors have allowed the British state to exert a "mainstreaming," conservative influence over the BBC.)<sup>450</sup> Commercial pressures can enter through this door as well: in Britain, the BBC has felt pressured to conform to its commercial competitors to retain market share, which is politically important when Parliament debates whether to increase the BBC's funding through the license fee.<sup>451</sup> Furthermore, the license fee is a form of regressive taxation, taking a greater proportion of

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<sup>448</sup> Nielsen and Linnebank, "Public Support," 8.

<sup>449</sup> Benson and Powers, "Public Media," 11-12.

<sup>450</sup> Garnham, *Structure of Television*, 19-34.

<sup>451</sup> Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*, 83.

poor households' income as against wealthy households. Introducing such a regressive tax in countries currently without license fees would be politically difficult, especially during economically lean times.

### **Content regulations**

*"I acknowledge that the tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by the freest discussion, but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby; the truth which ought to have been, but was not, seen, being rejected all the more violently because proclaimed by persons regarded as opponents. But it is not on the impassioned partisan, it is on the calmer and more disinterested bystander, that this collision of opinions works its salutary effect. Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil; there is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend to only one that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth, by being exaggerated into falsehood."*

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

One way to guarantee pluralism within the media system is to directly provide for it via regulation. Market mechanisms, while providing an admirable amount of diversity for many products, fail to provide diversity in news media markets due to structural, economic, and psychological factors.<sup>452</sup> The Dutch experience is a relevant starting point. In its recent history, the Netherlands has been called a "pillarized" society, with a variety of political parties organizing their own "pillars" of society: schools, social clubs, and

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<sup>452</sup> Polo, "Optimal Media," 30-31.

newspapers. This tended to produce ideological polarization, as socialists would interact predominantly with other socialists, Catholics with other Catholics, liberals with other liberals, and so on in several areas of day-to-day life. This “pillarization” or polarization was weakened by the introduction of Dutch public television, which allotted separate airtime to the various social groups. In this way, Catholics were introduced to socialists, liberals to orthodox Protestants, and these formerly separate groups developed a richer mutual understanding in place of the stereotypes they formerly had.<sup>453</sup>

This would be the primary goal of content regulations: to ensure that no one major media outlet is ideologically uniform, so as to impede the tendency toward ideological segregation and polarization. In her study of brainwashing, Kathleen Taylor notes that cults and terrorist groups instill a limited number of “ethereal ideas” – Max Stirner’s “spooks” – which form small, dense cognitive webs that tend to be impervious to change without plenty of competition from opposing ideas.<sup>454</sup> A similar process can occur with people who are exposed to ideologically-uniform news sources; therefore, as noted in Chapter 4, it is not enough to let a thousand (ideological) flowers bloom in the media system overall – they must bloom in the same outlet. While other proposals provide structural *opportunities* for diversity and pluralism, content regulation provides a more direct route to this central goal.<sup>455</sup> These regulations would be a natural extension of the public service requirements already (weakly) in force in the United States,<sup>456</sup> and fully-fledged models already exist in several European countries.<sup>457</sup> Commercial broadcasters could be required to provide

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<sup>453</sup> Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing*, 269.

<sup>454</sup> Taylor, *Brainwashing*, 256.

<sup>455</sup> Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*, 269.

<sup>456</sup> Bennett, *News*, 282

<sup>457</sup> Polo, “Optimal Media,” 22-23.

airtime to underrepresented social groups and organizations at preferential rates,<sup>458</sup> in order to provide pluralism *internal* to each outlet. The same requirement could be applied to grant airtime to political candidates, like the *Horário Gratuito de Propaganda Eleitoral* (“Free Electoral Political Advertising Time”) in Brazil,<sup>459</sup> as a condition of holding a broadcast license.<sup>460</sup>

While content regulations would certainly infringe upon the “freedom” of commercial enterprises, freedom of expression is granted to real persons, not businesses.<sup>461</sup> This is often confused; while the classical liberal version was originally conceived as “freedom to print” before there was a “press” or newspaper industry, let alone multinational media conglomerates, today it is misunderstood (and mistranslated) as “freedom of *the press*.”<sup>462</sup> Within its original, 17<sup>th</sup> century context, “freedom of *the press*” is an anachronism: no press as such existed at the time to receive a grant of freedom. Rather, the idea was that individual *persons* would be free *to print* their views without prior restraint.<sup>463</sup>

Therefore, content regulations guaranteeing pluralism in the media system would not infringe upon anyone’s freedom of expression. In fact, such regulations would *expand* the freedom of expression of all those without the economic power to start their own media outlet, and whose views do not currently receive an airing in the mass media. Regulating for diversity and pluralism would also avoid one of the problems of simpler “right of reply” or “fairness doctrine” regulations, which can have the effect of muzzling the

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<sup>458</sup> Sunstein, *Democracy*, 273-274.

<sup>459</sup> Porto, “Framing Controversies,” 20.

<sup>460</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 354.

<sup>461</sup> Guareschi, *O Direito Humano*, 106; Feintuck and Varney, *Media Regulation*, 9.

<sup>462</sup> de Lima, *Liberdade*, 27-28.

<sup>463</sup> Paine, *Collected Writings*, 429.

expression of partisan views.<sup>464</sup> This silencing effect is caused by financial considerations attendant to the regulation itself: the threat of lawsuits, or the loss of profitable airtime required to provide balance after one program expresses a given ideological position. By directly allotting time to proponents of a wide variety of political views, these negative unintended consequences can be avoided. With direct content regulations, loss of profitable airtime is already baked into the cake, and cannot be avoided by muzzling political speech. Lawsuits can be replaced with petitions to the regulatory agency tasked with ensuring internal diversity.

### **War reporting**

As discussed previously, the structural features of media systems seem least capable of positively affecting one particular aspect of journalism: reporting on war. It is here that structure seemingly cannot fully overcome the powerful forces of psychological bias in favor of one's in-group, and political pressure to "rally around the flag" in times of crisis.<sup>465</sup>

As the Israeli political sociologist Yoram Peri explains:

When the security situation is tense, pressure for consensus and uniformity tends to increase. At such times, the audience is less willing to hear different opinions. Therefore the media cannot completely fulfill its function as the arena where issues are hashed out or hammered out before being brought to the political system for a policy decision. An ongoing state of emergency undermines the readiness for pluralism, tolerance, and

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<sup>464</sup> Anderson & Thierer, *A Manifesto*, 25-27.

<sup>465</sup> Interestingly, structural features can influence media presentations of war in unexpected directions. For instance, the Chinese state broadcaster's coverage of the Iraq war ended up inadvertently supporting U.S. aggression – despite the Chinese government's official opposition – due to its reliance on footage from U.S. television that emphasized military might and advanced technology to the exclusion of critical perspectives. (Zhao, 2008, 151)

liberalism and amplifies public expectations that the media will exhibit more “social responsibility” – be less critical, more committed to collective endeavor, and more supportive of the national leadership. Above all, a state of emergency legitimizes the state’s deeper and deeper intrusion into the private sphere and into civic society. It demands that independent and professional considerations of journalists, as well as other professions such as law, accommodate or bend themselves to conform to state logic and *raison d’etat* [sic]. ...[P]luralism is perceived as weakening the unity of the besieged nation.<sup>466</sup>

The Israeli experience differs little from the American experience, and also involves the negative influence of contemporary journalistic professionalism. As argued by Robert McChesney, the historically weak and government-supporting coverage of foreign policy in the U.S. media is understandable as the result of broad agreement among political and business elites that “the United States, and it alone, has the right to invade any country it wants to at any time. No other country in the world has this privilege unless the United States deputizes it. This principle is never up for grabs in the U.S. media; only the timing of invasions is.”<sup>467</sup> Journalists feel constrained from questioning this simply because there are vanishingly few official sources who could be cited to convey critical opinions. The additional pressure exerted by commercial advertisers, who fear rocking the boat and drawing the ire of consumers during times of conflict, reinforces this effect.

This is where *independent* journalism is needed most. Too much governmental influence, and the media will tend to support only the government’s interpretation of a conflict; too much commercial influence, and the media will tend to reinforce the

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<sup>466</sup> Yoram Peri, “The Impact of National Security on the Development of Media Systems: The Case of Israel,” in *Comparing Media Systems: Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, 11-25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 22-24.

<sup>467</sup> McChesney and Hackett, “Beyond,” 231.



psychological prejudices of its agitated audience *by* supporting only the government's interpretation of a conflict. For instance, during Russia's first Chechen campaign in the mid-1990s, the Russian media were (briefly) free of developed commercial pressures or well-organized government control – as a direct result, the Russian media offered a much more balanced, pluralistic presentation than during the second Chechen campaign in 2000, when government and commercial pressures had consolidated along American lines.<sup>468</sup> “Thus,” Olessia Koltsova wryly observes, “quite in accordance with Western declarations about the necessity for Russia to learn from Western democracies, the Russian government has demonstrated a good ability to use their accumulated experience.”<sup>469</sup>

The space for independent journalism created by a strong public service media system can be particularly useful here. Content regulations for war reporting can also help, by ensuring that in every conflict situation there are voices in the media tasked with serving as the devil's (angel's?) advocate, to argue *against* military intervention if the dominant voices within government and the foreign policy establishment are overwhelming in favor. Such regulations could ensure the following features: a focus away from violence and toward facts about the parties involved, their attitudes, behavior, and the sources of conflict; coverage of stated motives but also underlying political-economic *interests*; focus away from individual leaders and toward historical and socioeconomic dimensions; defining the parties broadly and diversely, by focusing not only on leaders' uniform perspectives but also the conflicting perspectives of ordinary citizens; coverage of third party views from around the world; equal coverage of what is *not* stated by officials

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<sup>468</sup> Koltsova, *News Media*, 211-212, 221-222.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

along with what *is* stated; avoiding a focus on weapons and tactics that overshadows their effects on human beings; being as critical of enemy officials as the officials of one's own side; and, finally, continuing coverage of postwar consequences for both sides.<sup>470</sup> With these measures in place, a public service media system and journalists employing a reformed conception of professional journalism can ensure that even during times of conflict – when governmental, commercial, and psychological pressures are at their peak – the public sphere remains open to a diversity of viewpoints.

## **xi. Conclusion**

*“We have the impression that the American people do not realize what has happened to them. They are not aware that the communications revolution has occurred. They do not appreciate the tremendous power which the new instruments and the new organization of the press place in the hands of a few men. They have not yet understood how far the performance of the press falls short of the requirements of a free society in the world today.”*

- Hutchins' Commission Report (1947)

*“[W]hen media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches.”*

- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*

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<sup>470</sup> Oberg, “The Iraq Conflict,” 202.

*“It is also now becoming painfully clear that humanity’s existing political institutions for taking collective international action are sadly lagging behind the intricate global interconnections – economic and otherwise – that are being woven. Despite the many successes of our post-World War II global institutions – the United Nations, in particular – we remain far too much a world of independent states, each left to its own devices, despite a need for coordinated action to deal with the mutual dependency of an increasingly global society. The primary model of dealing with our global issues involves continuous negotiations rather than collective governance, except in a few discrete areas such as international trade. ... The first step in dealing with the daunting issues posed by globalization is to acquire information and knowledge, and this is the primary function of journalism and the press.”*

- Lee Bollinger, *Uninhibited, Robust, and Wide-Open*

If humanity could *ever* have afforded not to have a well-functioning system of information provision, now is a time we most certainly cannot. Even our most distant ancestors could live or die due to information or its lack: ignorance about predators’ territory or poisonous plants, or misinformation about neighboring tribes, could mean the difference between life and death. And this profound reliance upon information remains today, only with higher stakes: the life or death of the species, not a mere tribe. Nuclear weapons promise a quick extinction, and climate change threatens a slow extinction; the dangers posed by both can be avoided only through international cooperation and collective effort. Both dangers are perfect examples of what Walter Lippmann termed “ideas in our heads,” a collection of memes describing a reality that few if any of us can

directly witness, experience, or intuit on our own. These and similar dangers can only be addressed by *societal* action, exerted through government in cooperation with other governments. This being so, democratic societies can only take the necessary collective action through their governments when they are *informed* of systemic problems by the media. Otherwise, daily life provides no practical information, and individual ignorance leads to collective doom.

As Judge Learned Hand poignantly expressed it, democracy is based on the supposition that “right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all.”<sup>471</sup> And there are many good reasons to consider this supposition, on which we truly have staked our all, to be folly. We have not evolved the kind of rational psychology imagined by liberal political philosophy, and the psychology evolution *has* produced is rife with bias. These biases incline us toward ideas that confer individual or group advantages, or reinforce ideas we have already accepted – *not* toward “right conclusions,” whatever they are. China’s Communist Party implicitly recognizes this fact, and has understandably refused to stake its all on a pluralistic marketplace of ideas. And John Durham Peters has eloquently argued this position, concluding that “the ultimate danger of the ‘marketplace of ideas’ is not political but ethical. The notion offers a bogus reassurance, too easy a theodicy for truth, too facile an understanding of evil. The kind of thinking it encourages gives us little fortification against

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<sup>471</sup> *United States v. Associated Press*, 372.

disappointment by hard structural facts or against the lotus lands of egotism and hedonism.”<sup>472</sup>

Yet, supporters of democracy have few alternatives but to stand with Learned Hand, and stake our all on the potential folly of a public sphere comprising a multitude of tongues. This is the lynchpin of democracy; remove it, and democracy is no longer. A democratic media system is a *sine qua non* of democracy itself. Without a democratic media system, Kaarle Nordenstreng argues that democracies are “not entitled to look down on so-called totalitarian societies”<sup>473</sup> – and Robert Dahl pushes further, concluding that when media systems are controlled by only some rather than all, and the media produces direct effects on public opinion, “the model of plebiscitary democracy is substantially equivalent to the model of totalitarian rule.”<sup>474</sup>

Thus the movement to democratize the media is merely an extension of the struggle for democracy that has been ongoing for centuries around the world. Those on the other side of this struggle, from proponents of monarchy to defenders of capitalism *as* a media system, have shared in common the fear that a free and sovereign people will not use their power as responsibly as a king or the proprietors of media companies. The specter of the unruly mob destroying the social order, or the dominant majority silencing disfavored opinions, has always loomed large in their imaginations. But the combined experience of the world’s democracies has already nullified the first, and the experience of democracies with public service media systems proves that the second fear is similarly a bugaboo.

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<sup>472</sup> Peters, “The ‘Marketplace,’” 80.

<sup>473</sup> Christians and Nordenstreng, “Social Responsibility,” 5.

<sup>474</sup> Dahl, “Business and Politics,” 28.

So much for the alarmists; the skeptics, who like John Stuart Mill consider it “a piece of idle sentimentality” to hope that true opinions would have any inherent advantage over false opinions in a free and diverse public sphere, take a perfectly tenable position.<sup>475</sup> Opinions that are “true” – in the sense that if their preferred policies were implemented they would produce the positive outcomes predicted by the opinion – have no such inherent advantage on their own. Political opinions are so many estimates about how the world operates, and which interventions will improve its operation. As such, they are fundamentally constructed out of facts, whether accurate or inaccurate; that is to say, opinions are constructed out of the available information. This reveals the profundity of Walter Lippmann’s insight, “In going behind opinion to the information which it exploits, and in making the validity of the news our ideal, we shall be fighting the battle where it is really being fought.”<sup>476</sup> The proposals of the media democratization movement do precisely this: allow and even encourage the widest possible variety of opinions, but ensure that the information which they exploit is sound.

With this first in place, then let the chips fall as they may. I, along with billions around the world who embrace the democratic ideal, am willing to stake my all on a multitude of tongues. Whether the multitude of *ears* will tend to choose ideas that prove themselves to be good remains an open question; but it is one that millions of years of evolution have been attempting to answer in the positive. This evolutionary process occurred in much smaller social environments – in tribes rather than mass societies – but in the absence of a better proposed political system, we have little left than to *hope* that our

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<sup>475</sup> Peters, “The ‘Marketplace,’” 69-70.

<sup>476</sup> Lippmann, *Liberty*, 41.

evolved reasoning capacities can meet contemporary challenges with success. Without a media system designed to give our minds the chance to meet these challenges, we lack even hope.

This may seem abstract and speculative, and it is – of necessity. But as a thought experiment, imagine if the following were typical of the broadcast news available within the United States at the beginning of 2003:

*Good evening. Today, we look toward Iraq, and the possibility of war. This morning the Bush administration issued a warning to the Hussein regime that all military options are on the table if Iraq does not disarm. We will hear from White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer on the threat posed by Iraqi WMD, followed by UN weapons inspector Hans Blix for his skeptical view of the danger. Then, we will turn to our rotating panel representing libertarian, liberal, paleoconservative, neoconservative, and socialist perspectives for a lively discussion and debate. Finally, if there is war, what will the Iraqi reaction be? For that, we will turn to Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, along with representatives of Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish communities, a Baath Party spokesperson, and the leader-in-exile of the Iraqi Communist Party. But first, economic news: while most Americans and economists are happy about the steadily rising value of their homes, especially in the wake of the dot-com crash, some economists are beginning to warn of a housing bubble, and the danger posed by so-called 'subprime' mortgages...*

## **Conclusion:**

### **The Invisible Hand and the Ecology of Information**

*"In a way, the world-view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it. They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything..."*

- George Orwell, 1984

*"I have often chided my Soviet friends on the naïveté of their country's censorship. Newly literate and still awed by the printed word, the Russian governors are terrified of ideas. If only they knew what our governors know – that in a massive egalitarian society no idea which runs counter to the prevailing superstitions can successfully penetrate the official carapace."*

- Gore Vidal, "The Unrocked Boat" (1958)

*"And they say, 'The people are dumb.' No, they're not dumb, they are ignorant."*

- Gore Vidal, *I Told You So* (2006)

*"From the proletarians nothing is to be feared. Left to themselves, they will continue from generation to generation and from century to century, working, breeding and dying, not only*



*without any impulse to rebel, but without the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is. ... What opinions the masses hold, or do not hold, is looked on as a matter of indifference. They can be granted intellectual liberty because they have no intellect."*

- George Orwell, 1984

Unlike Orwell's classic dystopian novel, today's United States does not have a Big Brother. There is no Ministry of Truth, Ministry of Love, Ministry of Peace, or Ministry of Plenty; there is no *The Party*, consciously applying means of controlling the public. But the United States does have a different kind of *the Party*, the "Property Party," with its Republican and Democratic wings.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. does not have a daily "Two Minutes Hate" – on some television and radio stations, it has Twenty-Four Hours Hate. The U.S. does not have a Records Department producing "rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope known as a versificator"<sup>2</sup> – production of the same is handled instead by five media conglomerates (and the state of pop music suggests that some variant of the versificator may be in use). Big Brother Is *Not* Watching – but the NSA is, in partnership with technology companies.<sup>3</sup> There are no "telescreens" through which Big Brother

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<sup>1</sup> "[T]here is only one political party in the United States and that is the Property Party, whose Republican wing tends to be rigid in maintaining the status quo and not given to any accommodation of the poor and the black. Although the Democratic wing shares most of the basic principles (that is to say, money) of the Republicans, its members are often shrewd enough to know that what is too rigid will shatter under stress." (Vidal, 2001, 912)

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Penguin Books, 1990): 45-46.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ferguson et al., "Party Competition and Industrial Structure in the 2012 Elections: Who's Really Driving the Taxi to the Dark Side?" *International Journal of Political Economy* 42, no. 2 (2013): 5-7.

watches, but there are “eerily reminiscent” modern equivalents.<sup>4</sup> And as a tech-savvy law school classmate observed, Big Brother’s spying capabilities actually seem quaint and nearly unobjectionable when compared to those of the NSA and other agencies.<sup>5</sup> Imagine the endless kilometers of warehouse filled to the ceiling with shelves of paper files and videotapes, which a Ministry of Love employee would have to traverse to research a citizen suspected of disloyalty to the Party. Then compare that to XKEYSCORE, the “NSA’s Google for the world’s private communications,” about which one security researcher comments: “The amount of work an analyst has to perform to actually break into remote computers over the Internet seems ridiculously reduced — we are talking minutes, if not seconds. Simple. As easy as typing a few words in Google.”<sup>6</sup> And while Orwell did not imagine Big Brother to spy on citizens’ sex lives (except perhaps to monitor and ensure that they were bland, procreative, and minimally pleasurable), NSA employees have been known to do so, with sufficient frequency that a spycraft neologism was forged to describe the practice: LOVEINT, presumably short for “love intelligence” (bringing new meaning to the “Ministry of Love”).<sup>7</sup>

But besides the differences in spying technology, there is a more fundamental difference between Big Brother and the NSA: intent. In common law, intent (*mens rea*) is often treated as of equal importance with the act of a crime itself (*actus reus*): *actus reus*

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<sup>4</sup> Spencer Ackerman and James Ball, “Optic Nerve: Millions of Yahoo Webcam Images Intercepted by GCHQ,” *The Guardian* (February 24, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Many running tabs of spy agency powers can be found online: e.g., “A Running List of What We Know the NSA Can Do. So Far.” (<http://www.wnyc.org/story/running-list-what-we-know-nsa-can-do-so-far/>); “A Comprehensive [sic] List of Every Known Capability of the NSA” (<http://theantimedia.org/a-comprehensive-list-of-every-known-capability-of-the-nsa/>); and “NSALeaks Wiki” (<https://www.reddit.com/r/NSALeaks/wiki/index>).

<sup>6</sup> Morgan Marquis-Boire et al., “XKEYSCORE: NSA’s Google for the World’s Private Communications,” *The Intercept* (July 1, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Adam Gabbatt, “NSA Analysts ‘Wilfully Violated’ Surveillance Systems, Agency Admits,” *The Guardian* (August 24, 2013).

*non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*, or the act is not culpable unless the mind is guilty. While the Party certainly *intended* to create a totalitarian state through mind control, U.S. intelligence agencies instead intend only to keep the population safe (and, at times, to investigate a current or ex-lover). Yet while the question of intent is essential in apportioning guilt, it is less consequential for political analysis. More important is the *actus reus*, the thing itself: structures and their effects. A conspiracy theory is not needed to explain the *capabilities* of intelligence agencies and their *effects* on privacy, which have more political import than the *intent* of government officials and their business partners.

A common reaction to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model" of the U.S. media is to dismiss it as a (false) conspiracy theory.<sup>8</sup> It is nothing of the sort. It is an analysis of structural (or *selection*) pressures that in the aggregate produce media coverage of foreign policy substantially similar to that which an *intentional* propaganda system would produce. The argument of this book is much the same: *intent* is irrelevant, a conspiracy unnecessary, in the face of demand- and supply-side biases or pressures that produce effects similar to that of an intentional propaganda system. (In fact, a conspiracy is highly unlikely to even be *possible* in a media system like that of the United States; the number of people required to execute a conspiracy would make its exposure a mathematical near-certainty in a just few years.)<sup>9</sup> The similarities are striking: a review of Robert Lifton's eight psychological themes of totalitarian societies finds *seven* operating in some form in the U.S. media.<sup>10</sup> "Milieu control" (1984's the Records Department) is evoked in the standardization of media content produced by journalistic professionalism, source

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<sup>8</sup> See references in Klaehn and Mullen, "The Propaganda Model," 14.

<sup>9</sup> David Robert Grimes, "On the Viability of Conspiratorial Beliefs," *PloS One* 11, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Brainwashing*, 17, 57-58, 61.

bias, and market forces; “the demand for purity” (1984’s Ministry of Truth or Thought Police) appears in political analysis that stays within narrow ideological bounds, and in the dumbing-down or simplification of news content to reach a broad or desirable audience; the “cult of confession” (Winston’s coerced confession in Room 101) is practiced in tell-all interviews and reality TV shows; “loading the language” (1984’s Newspeak) is evident in political correctness, euphemisms like “collateral damage,” and terminology (like “entitlements,” connoting a sense of entitlement, for the social safety net); “sacred science” (The Party’s basic dogmas, like WAR IS PEACE) is paralleled by unquestioning adherence to American exceptionalism; and “the dispensing of existence” (The Party’s ability to murder or “vaporize” its enemies) has a ghastly echo in “extraordinary rendition,” the death penalty, and drone assassinations, which are just shy of praised by the major media outlets. Lifton’s eighth theme, “the primacy of doctrine over person” (a perfect description of The Party’s philosophy), is more *distantly* echoed in individualist or “cult of the individual” societies like the U.S. – where doctrine hardly dominates against a population of rights-obsessed individualists – but traces can be made out in the primacy of “national security” doctrine over *foreign* persons.

With eight out of eight of themes of totalitarian ideology either instantiated or evoked by the U.S. media system, it certainly seems to be, if not totalitarian, uncomfortably totalitarian-esque. Returning to Robert Dahl’s conjecture on the possibility of a totalitarian media, the key requirement for a plebiscitary democracy to be functionally equivalent to totalitarian rule was elites’ ability to “plug in,” hypodermic-needle fashion, desired opinions into the minds of the electorate. We can now review the evidence on whether this plugging-in ability exists, or in what form it might.

### **i. A review of the evidence**

*“The people in the sense in which Lincoln used the term, as referring to the electorate, is an organized body, but it is not of as high a type as a beast, for a beast, even though vaguely, has a consciousness of its unity, its selfhood. The people, the organized body of the citizenship has a unity, a selfhood, but it is no more conscious of it than are the coördinated cells of a cabbage leaf of their unity. The people is not a great beast. The people is a great vegetable.”*

Edward J. Ward, *The Social Center*

At some point during the process of gathering the evidence to flesh out how cultural evolution theory could be applied to politics, a neuronal connection was forged in my mind between two unlikely ideas: the way the media exerts power in the political realm, and a certain scene in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. In the scene, a barracks is full of Marine Corps’ recruits fresh into basic training en route to Vietnam, and they are being inspected by their drill instructor. The inimitable Gunnery Sergeant Hartmann (played by an ex-Marine who ad-libbed his lines) delivers a grotesque threat to one vulnerable recruit – who eventually goes mad under abuse, killing himself and the sergeant – bellowing inches from his face: “wipe that stupid-looking grin off your face or I will *gouge out your eyeballs and skull-fuck you!*”<sup>11</sup> Television news also enters through our eye sockets; perhaps it was that commonality that forged the neuronal connection. But the brutal violence of the image also seemed involved, recalling Fauconnier and Turner’s conceptual blending: the violence of murder and sexual mutilation, blending with a form of violence some would call “spiritual,”

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<sup>11</sup> An alternate title for this book: *The Theory of Media as Skull-Fucker*.

others “intellectual,” depending on whether the violence is believed to be perpetrated against the spirit or intellect. The damage to the U.S. electorate’s political knowledge caused by the structure of the U.S. media system is a telltale mark of this sort of violence. The connection stuck.

The French philosopher Michel Serres strengthened this connection, by tracing the way that bodily emissions like urine are used by animals to *mark* their dominance of territory, and semen in patriarchal societies is thought to *mark* a woman’s body as possessed by a man, in a “sexual version of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”<sup>12</sup> He notes a similarity between soiling by bodily emissions marking ownership, pollution as a mark or emission of wealth, and advertising as a form of *mental* pollution that marks and soils the public sphere and public space: “tsunamis of writing, signs, images, and logos flooding rural, civic, public and natural spaces as well as landscapes with their advertising. Even though different in terms of energy, garbage and marks nevertheless result from the same soiling gesture, from the same intention to appropriate, and are of animal origin.”<sup>13</sup> Serres is particularly incensed<sup>14</sup> by billboards – “he who dirties space with billboards full of sentences and images hides the view of the surrounding landscape, kills perception, and skewers it by this theft” – but also recognizes the polluting violence of television: “Just as the images and vivid colors of billboards prevent us from seeing the landscape, steal and occupy it, seize, repress, and kill it, parasitic noise prevents us from speaking to and hearing our neighbor,

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Serres, *Malfeasance* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2011): 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. “Like ... a vile skirt-chaser whistling after a woman, the manufacturer scatters his products and advertises their supposed excellence shouting as loudly as possible. Everyone spreads out in space. They piss in the swimming pool.... Inundated and deafened by advertising, who doesn’t see an anus in the baffle of a loudspeaker?” (Serres, 2011, 42)

<sup>14</sup> Incense would seem to be the divine counterpart of bodily emissions marking dominion: unlike human forms, it has a pleasing smell, and is used as if to acknowledge the dominion of God over sacred objects and spaces.

thereby monopolizing communication.... No one can have a dialogue; everyone listens to and looks at the screen, whose emissions (what a purely urinary admission!) appropriate all relations."<sup>15</sup> We are soiled and assaulted by commercial media, in which even communication about public affairs adopts the vapidness of the advertisement. The media system produces a dynamic which

resembles that of *violence, the garbage of action*: he who receives a blow, or who hears a word, returns it or repeats it, and so on and on, until we are all literally possessed by those purveyors of images, *pictorial waste*, or sounds, *language garbage*; purveyors of repetition, *thought garbage* . . . *in short, possessed by audiovisual garbage that is so easily changed into money*, which itself is also easily transformed into waste.... Possessed, I myself become a waste of my own consciousness. The repetition of noise intoxicates as much as violence. We all become loudspeakers. Listen to current dialogues; everyone repeats the current repetition. The same loop encircles us all.<sup>16</sup>

Skull-fucking indeed: both the violence and possession-by-pollution are present. And seemingly *omnipresent*, as U.S. households watch over 50 hours of television a week, and households with four or more children watch over eight hours *per day*.<sup>17</sup> This bombardment of mental pollution includes over-simplified presentations of politics and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>17</sup> Mary A. Hepburn, "Electronic Media and Political Socialization in the USA," in *Democratization, Europeanization, and Globalization Trends: Cross-National Analysis of Authoritarianism, Socialization, Communications, Youth, and Social Policy*, ed. Russell F. Farnen et al., 197-205 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2005): 198.

heavy doses of violence, comprising a significant part of the psychological field or world in which we are socialized.<sup>18</sup>

Tim Kasser reveals the high cost of advertising as the inculcation of materialist values, which in turn produce selfishness, isolation, and unhappiness; and experiments have revealed that exposure to U.S. television news produces a materialistic, aggressive form of subconscious nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Advertising itself and the advertising-fueled commercial news media share deeper similarities, as Joseph Schumpeter argued: The ways in which issues and the popular will on any issue are being manufactured is exactly analogous to the ways of commercial advertising. We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious. We find the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are. We find the same evasions and reticences and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people. And so on. *Only, all these arts have infinitely more scope in the sphere of public affairs than they have in the sphere of private and professional life.* The picture of the prettiest girl that ever lived will in the long run prove powerless to maintain the sales of a bad cigarette. There is no equally effective safeguard in the case of political decisions. Many decisions of fateful importance are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them at it leisure and at

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 200, 203-204.

<sup>19</sup> Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism*; Ferguson et al., "On the Automaticity"; See also Chapter 4, sections ii-iii.



moderate cost. Even if that is possible, however, judgment is as a rule not so easy to arrive at as it is in the case of the cigarette, because effects are less easy to interpret.<sup>20</sup>

The media's role in social and political evolution, or specifically in the evolution of political memes, is of course, far more than just violence and pollution. It educates, informs, and gives wings to facts; it shapes the blocks we use to build our political understandings; it unites and divides. It is somewhat like the sun in earth's ecologies: it is just one part of an overall ecology, but without it most would be exterminated. (Likewise, without a news media, *national* politics could not exist; there would be only a small political sphere in the vicinity of capital cities, just as the only ecologies on earth without the sun would be those of the deep sea drawing upon isolated pockets of geothermal energy.) Even better, the media is like one of the gods of ancient Greek religion – it is not omnipotent, but plenty potent, jostling with other powerful gods to exercise its will or to shape the political realm. And this Greek god “Media” is itself not a unity, but is better conceived as composed of the entire populous pantheon of Hinduism, from Brahma the creator as the internet to Shiva the destroyer as News Corporation, besides hundreds of thousands of other gods (all the forces in the political economy of media). The media, this internal multiplicity of gods jostling among an external multiplicity of gods, has tended to fulfill Benjamin Franklin's dark prophesy about the U.S. form of government, that it “is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in Despotism, as other forms have done before it, when *the people* shall become so corrupted as to need despotic Government, being incapable of any other.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962): 263, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Gore Vidal, *Gore Vidal's State of the Union: Nation Essays 1958-2005* (New York: The Nation Company, 2013): 240, emphasis added. Vidal writes:

We started out asking how the invisible hand operates in the contemporary marketplace of ideas, what with the crooked timber of human psychology and the broken fourth branch of government, the media. The accumulated evidence forms a picture that reveals why the “meme” is such an apt word to refer to the bits of information in this marketplace. It was useful when first introduced simply for being shorter and more memorable than alternate terms like cultural, ideational, or information evolution; now it is even better, after developing an additional meaning from an obvious exemplar of “memes,” the entertaining picture-jokes evolving and spreading over the internet. The term “meme” economizes on information and meaning: it conveys the arbitrariness, the hollowness, the ephemerality of what information we happen to be exposed to (“it’s just some stupid meme on the internet”), while at the same time the physicality and “particulateness” of information (“if I didn’t *absorb* that meme, I don’t *have* it – so what do I know about it?”).

So why do we have the memes we have? And up to the level of ideology: why do we have the ideologies we have, and why do we *not* have the ideologies we do *not* have? If memes evolved solely according to their own dynamics, with short, memorable, and entertaining memes (like the picture-joke memes of the internet) dominating, then we might inhabit a very strange alternate universe. Like the inter-dimensional adventures of the cartoon sitcom *Rick and Morty*, we could be in any number of infinite, fantastic parallel dimensions; we could inhabit a world where the dominant ideology is that right-handers were created to be the servants of left-handers, because a magical seahorse wrote a holy

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It was Benjamin Franklin, of all people, who saw our future most clearly back in 1787, when, as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia, he read for the first time the proposed Constitution. He was old; he was crying; he was not well enough to speak but he had prepared a text that a friend read. It was so dark a statement that most school history books omit his key words.

book eons ago that tells us so. But Shiping Tang reminds us that “any framework on social [or memetic] evolution that does not explicitly admit power as a critical selection force is incomplete.”<sup>22</sup> Hence Yorgos Lanthimos’ film *Dogtooth*, an allegory on fascism, patriarchy, and paternalism, provides a better example. In the film, three grown-yet-infantile children are kept inside the boundaries of their hedge-fenced yard by their parents, who cow them into immobilizing fear with lies about the dangers of the outside world. These lies are not “white” or superficial, they are foundational: they are memes that *create* the world outside which the children will never directly experience. (“Sea,” which the children will never see, is defined as a “leather armchair”; one of the daughters sees the word “pussy” on a videocassette case, and her mother tells her it means a “large lamp.”) They are told they can leave their home only when one of their canine teeth, a “dogtooth,” falls out, signifying the onset of maturity required to survive in the outside world. Toward the end of the film, the male child is commanded to rape one of his sisters, and he does so; anticipating future rapes, she later smashes out one of her dogteeth with a dumbbell to attempt an escape. As Voltaire wrote: “You believe in incomprehensible, contradictory and impossible things because we have commanded you to; now then, commit unjust acts because we likewise order you to do so.”<sup>23</sup>

To a circumscribed but still discomfoting extent, the U.S. media system echoes the sadistic, controlling parents of *Dogtooth*, with the citizenry as their adult but infantilized children, whose pictures-in-the-head of the outside world are distorted, limited, and artificial. Power operating in the realm of social evolution produces these artifices,

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<sup>22</sup> Tang, *The Social Evolution*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Norman L. Torrey, *Les Philosophes: The Philosophers of the Enlightenment and Modern Democracy* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961): 277.

limitations, and distortions. Not the *intentional* exercise of power as in *Dogtooth*, but the unintentional, multifarious varieties of power comprising the political economy of media in interaction with the ecology of human psychology. Through the news media, the U.S. public is told that their form of government, and what their government's military exploits are meant to spread around the world, is "democracy"; and that its military and covert operations are to ensure "security" and to protect the "national interest." Indeed, those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.

The beginning of an understanding of this process lies in recognizing the physical nature of information, and how it evolves. Information, in genes or brains, inheres in the organization of physical matter. Sources of variation (mutation, recombination; ideation, idea-blending) introduce new variants, which are computed by the surrounding environment: variants that survive longer and spread more widely are "selected," incrementally ratcheting up the complexity or "fit" of the information to aspects of the environment. In the realm of social evolution, there are three interpenetrating levels: the biological, the cultural, and the social, each with their own selection pressures. At the biological and cultural levels, schema research shows that we process incoming information to complement our existing information, sometimes distorting it in the process, making for a bias toward the status quo and the conservation of beliefs. At the social level, social representations research illustrates how socially-shared understandings – similar bundles of memes – emerge and spread, principally through the media but also through other institutions, and how these understandings affect politics. To understand social evolution then, we must understand the environment: the demand-side pressures in the human brain, and the supply-side pressures from institutions.

The first place to look for demand-side pressures in the human brain is in its evolutionary history. Our species was partially created through climate change (and, ironically, we may destroy the species through the climate change we ourselves created), which changed our environment and created a new set of selection pressures for us to adapt to. We did so in a most unusual way: by evolving a “theory of mind,” joint intentionality, and language, and overcoming the ever-present lure of self-interested, selfish behavior through a powerful psychological aversion to domination – an “egalitarian syndrome” – undergirding and reinforcing social norms and practices to discourage or eliminate bullies and would-be alphas. We became the first non-insect *eusocial* species in the animal kingdom. In the process, an evolutionarily-stable strategy or equilibrium was reached, with roughly half of the population having characteristics of the psychological Right (a desire for tradition and continuity, and an acceptance of hierarchy) and the other half with characteristics of the psychological Left (a desire for change and novelty, and for egalitarianism). Together, this “strategy” would allow for the evolutionary algorithm to apply at the social level, with the Left introducing new variations, and the Right preserving past variations deemed to be adaptive. Differences in the *psychological* Left and Right extend to morality, with leftists valuing care and fairness more than rightists, and rightists valuing respect for authority, sanctity, and loyalty more than leftists. In total, these products of our evolutionary history produce a separate set of demand-side biases for the psychological Left and Right.

Liberalism as a (predominant) political philosophy views human beings as innate reasoners capable of meeting a relatively high standard of rationality in their thinking

about politics. Yet this view is overwhelmed by the accumulated evidence of human irrationality in the political domain:

- Automatic, unconscious moral decisions justified by *ad hoc* rationalizations; a vast area of cognition (System 1) to which we have no conscious access, and *persuasion* that occurs through unconscious, System 1 processing;
- A mental architecture favoring cognitive consistency and low anxiety over accuracy and moral principle;
- Groupishness aroused by the most arbitrary and meaningless group distinctions, biasing us in favor of our in-group and against out-groups;
- We engage in groupthink, demonstrate ideological biases in memory, gullibly accept incoming information, and fail to revise discredited beliefs;
- We exhibit a tendency to justify and desire the status quo, regardless of its flaws, and to ignore dire problems in proportion to their urgency and complexity;
- Weak arguments do not weakly persuade, but rather inoculate us against accepting a strong version of the same argument, making weak balance in the media more manipulative than no balance at all;
- The myriad ways in which evil actions can be rationalized, removed from their context, or ignored, particularly in the case of war;
- The “interpreter” mechanism in our minds that produces self-deception by bringing only flattering information and motives into conscious awareness, while leaving ulterior motives and unflattering information in the dark;
- Stark differences in cognitive development, with a small minority developing a systematic style of thought analogous to the liberal ideal, while a majority develop

only a linear or sequential style incapable of the complex reasoning democracy requires.

Media systems must therefore themselves be intentionally biased to some extent to counteract or mute our demand-side, psychological biases; without such calibration, even a perfectly fair and balanced media can produce irrationally biased results at the level of opinion, owing to our suboptimal psychology. A psychologically-appropriate media system would be pluralist and open, favoring a diversity of perspectives and speakers, and constantly seeking to frustrate distortions like in-group bias and system justification. (An outline of such a media system is elaborated below.)

Psychological biases would be of little concern to a media system that produces minimal effects. This is not the case: the media produces large effects, which only seem minimal when opposing messages largely cancel each other out. Not only political messages, but advertising and cultural programming affect opinions and influence socialization. The cognitive conservatism of our brains' design makes snowballing effects more likely than deep revisions of previously-held beliefs, giving an absorption-advantage to information consonant with dominant social representations. (Another key source of the information forming social representations, the educational system, is discussed below.) Whether through priming, framing, agenda-setting, or direct persuasion, decades of research have revealed the media to be a powerful force in shaping public opinion. Hence, to a large extent elites do have the *ability* to plug in their preferences through the media to get what they want out of the system; though the metaphor of a plug suggests a degree of ease that is somewhat lacking. The "socket" is a moving target, and not always yielding.

The plug – the media system itself – has been recognized as a powerful force throughout its history, and treated as such by governments for most of it. Yet at a pivotal juncture – the development of radio and then television – the United States’ government made the fateful decision to turn the broadcast media over to commercial enterprises, which used it increasingly for the narrow goal of fat profits. This is the first of several biases skewing media content: toward the perceived desires of women and young adults, including sensationalism, a liberal take on social issues, and more lifestyle or sports coverage. Journalists themselves tend to be left-of-center on social issues, and centrist or right-of-center on economic issues, and there is evidence of renewed ownership pressure on journalists to avoid coverage damaging to their parent companies’ or advertisers’ interests. Additional filters influence what information appears in the mass media: the code of journalistic professionalism removing context from stories in a quixotic quest for objectivity, source bias and indexing privileging the powerful, pack journalism and social influences from those whom journalists cover, advertiser pressure and flak, and even direct influence from the government. The cumulative result is that the media system “plug” gives preference to perspectives and interests of the economic and political elite, echoing the status quo-supporting biases of human psychology. Biases of both demand and supply skew toward the status quo, slowing social evolution by reducing sources of novelty and variation. The inputs “plugged in” to the system do not produce perfectly predictable outputs; but the media system allows certain inputs to be *blocked*, thereby *preventing* or *impeding* certain outputs. The answer to Dahl’s conjecture seems to be that if the plebiscitary democracy of the U.S. is not strictly the functional equivalent of totalitarian rule, it is a worryingly close approximation.



Looking around the world at the other media systems in existence, the struggle to avoid both the pap of commercialism and the propaganda of government control seems universal. Worst off is Russia's media system, both highly commercialized and subject to government control. In form, China's media system is similar, but in substance differs markedly; it provides an unexpected sort of confirmation of the propaganda model of the U.S. media system, by demonstrating how commercialism can produce propagandistic effects (only in China's case, these effects are the *intention* of government policy). Latin American media systems are similar to Russia's, but may be improving under pressure from movements to democratize the media. The media systems closest to approximating the democratic ideal are those of northern Europe, the Democratic Corporatist model. These media systems retain a strong, well-funded public service media that does a far better job than commercial media of informing the electorate (and even influences commercial media in a positive direction, along with content regulations). In the presence of legal mechanisms to weaken government influence over public media, government-funded public service media is a force tending toward a more knowledgeable (and more *equally*-knowledgeable) citizenry, one better able to identify its various interests and match them to political policies. No wonder that levels of voting are higher in countries with strong public service media.

The accumulated evidence makes unavoidable the conclusion that the U.S. media system (along with many others) is vitiating democracy, gutting it of any pretention to be a system of government in which all people exercise equal political power. The evidence does not support the view that government has been "mediatized" in the sense of having been completely taken over by an omnipotent media: "that is, a planned organization of political

consent *by* the news media” – rather, the evidence conclusively demonstrates that “consent is organized *through* the media.”<sup>24</sup> The anti-democratic manufacturing of consent occurs *through*, not *by*, the media. If the media is the plug, and the socket is the electorate, the hand doing the plugging-in is that of the economic and political elite. Despite democratic formalities, in substance we are ruled by, in Thomas Macaulay’s words, “the opinion of some class which has power over the rest of the community,” which via the media is then plugged in, with greater or lesser success, into the minds of the public, thereby shaping public opinion – and the vote.<sup>25</sup>

What political memes are prevalent among the United States electorate? That is, what information do voters get delivered to them by the predominant provider of information logistics, the media? An observer is likely to first notice that they are very few in number. The electorate may not be stupid, but it is unarguably ignorant – and ignorant of the extent of its ignorance.<sup>26</sup> For an observer aware of the breadth of the *global* political

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<sup>24</sup> Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, “‘Mediatization’ of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?” *Political Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999): 259.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Lord Macaulay’s Essays and Lays of Ancient Rome* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1892): 120. For a defense of government by unmanipulated public opinion, not an aristocracy – or, which is much the same thing, government by a public opinion manipulated by only a certain class, Macaulay deserves to be quoted at length:

[N]ow, public opinion governs. What are laws but the expressions of the opinion of some class which has power over the rest of the community? By what was the world ever governed, but by the opinion of some person or persons? By what else can it ever be governed? What are all systems, religious, political, or scientific, but opinions resting on evidence more or less satisfactory? The question is not between human opinion, and some higher and more certain mode of arriving at truth, but between opinion and opinion, – between the opinion of one man and another, or of one class and another, or of one generation and another. Public opinion is not infallible; but can [anyone] construct any institutions which shall secure to us the guidance of an infallible opinion? Can [anyone] select any family, – any profession – any class, in short, distinguished by any plain badge from the rest of the community, whose opinion is more likely to be just than this much-abused public opinion? Would he choose the peers, for example? Or the two hundred tallest men in the country? Or the poor Knights of Windsor? Or children who are born with cawls, seventh sons of seventh sons? We cannot suppose that he would recommend popular election; for that is merely an appeal to public opinion. And to say that society ought to be governed by the opinion of the best, though true, is useless. Whose opinion is to decide who are the wisest and best?

<sup>26</sup> This is the Dunning-Kruger effect: “[P]eople are destined not to know where the solid land of their knowledge ends and the slippery shores of their ignorance begin. In perhaps the cruelest irony, the one

spectrum, and the variety of ideologies around the world, the second most likely observation is that the Right and Left in the U.S. are surprisingly similar. Disagreements on identity politics run deep, but some of the most central issues of politics – how to produce and distribute goods and services, and interact with the rest of the world – are only fleetingly debated, as would be expected of a population ignorant of the variety of perspectives on these issues. So what does it mean for the voters to *decide* on economic or foreign policy, for instance, or to choose representatives to carry out the voters' will in government? To ask the question is to answer it.

Nonetheless, the evidence does not allow for a strict deterministic reading: inputs do not *determine* outputs. Input from the media determines what information will be widely held, but not how that information will be processed and acted upon. Conceptual blending itself can produce kaleidoscopic effects: a character or storyline from a movie or novel can blend with the anemic information provided by the media to create radically divergent ideas about a politician or political policy. For instance, the characters in *House of Cards* or *In the Loop* can blend with mere horserace coverage of politics to create a deeply cynical attitude toward politicians, even if they are generally presented positively in the media (creating arguably more-accurate knowledge even in the absence of many relevant memes). Yet despite the important distinction between *determining* and *influencing*, it does little to reduce the democratic deficit. Leaving the formation of an accurately-informed citizenry up to their own creativity is a crapshoot, with as great a likelihood of success as tossing paint against a canvas and hoping to create a painting to rival Jackson Pollock's.

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thing people are most likely to be ignorant of is the extent of their own ignorance—where it starts, where it ends, and all the space it fills in-between.” (Dunning, 2011, 250)

Imprisoned in the Ministry of Love's infamous "Room 101," Winston was tortured and interrogated by a member of the Inner Party, a man named O'Brien:

'There is a Party slogan dealing with the control of the past,' he said. 'Repeat it, if you please.'

"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," repeated Winston obediently.

"Who controls the present controls the past," said O'Brien, nodding his head with slow approval. 'Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence?' ... 'Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?' ... '[The past exists i]n memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past...'

Like the past, information about the political present also resides in memory, and arrives there through the news media. The stuff of politics does exist in space, but like the past, it is largely unobservable, untouchable, and can only be understood through information delivered through the means of communication. We are still a long way from *1984*; no Party controls all records and all memories. But the parallel is clear: anyone, or any group or class, who can control information controls nearly all.

## **ii. Another influence: Education**

James Madison argued that a federation of states would be a safeguard against factions, or what we might call interest groups today. But our conception of interest groups is more variegated than his conception of faction, which was primarily economic and class-

based: “the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination.”<sup>27</sup> He feared that unimpeded, democracy would allow the more numerous factions – debtors and those without property – to use the vote to cancel debts and take property away from those whose supposedly superior faculties allowed them to amass it.<sup>28</sup> Hence his advocacy for a constitution that would institute the Senate as one means of ensuring that the minority faction who hold property could rebuff attempts by the majority to redistribute it. (Another means, that of “giving to every citizen the same opinions,” was deemed “impracticable” – as it was, before the modern mass media.)<sup>29</sup>

The Federalist scheme succeeded, and continues to succeed even after universal suffrage. Coming from a perspective closer to that of the anti-Federalists, Nicholas Garnham argues that the “neglect of [the] central role played by *communications* in society accounts in part for a certain sense of frustration, even failure, among those engaged in the long struggle for democracy. The vote has been won and little has changed.”<sup>30</sup> To explain

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2011): 68.

<sup>28</sup> His fears, along with those of other Federalists, were based on reading the works of ancient Greeks and Romans, disproportionately those of the propertied, whose class (or factional) interests quite understandably made them ill-disposed to democracy. As Roslyn Fuller explains:

The Founding Fathers knew comparatively little about how democracy was practiced in ancient Athens, and what they did know was often acquired from strongly biased sources. ... [M]ost of the political treatises that have surfaced from ancient Athens were written by very wealthy individuals. These individuals had the time and resources to lavish on writing, but they also tended to dislike democracy as a system of government because it had displaced them as the ‘natural’ rulers of the country. Despite the clear bias in many of these writings, until history began to be systematically studied as an academic discipline, most of these early writers’ opinions were not only read out of context, they were also accepted as fact. ... At the same time, preserved writings from the Roman Republic were almost always written by the oligarchs. ...[R]elying on these sources led influential Federalist thinkers like James Madison to incorrect conclusions. (Fuller, 2015, 272)

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers*, 66-67.

<sup>30</sup> Garnham, *Structures*, 14, emphasis added.

why so little has changed, another central role must be accorded to the educational system. A democracy-appropriate media system is necessary but not sufficient for a functioning marketplace of ideas.<sup>31</sup> So too, an understanding of the ecology of political information is incomplete without the role played by education.

Research has demonstrated that schools, along with the media and family members, are key conduits for the transmission of political knowledge; and not only the school curriculum, but even more so the *latent* curriculum, or *how* classes are taught.<sup>32</sup> (Part of the latent curriculum causing effects on political socialization is the network of friendships students have.)<sup>33</sup> The effects of schooling on political sophistication seem to be mostly exhausted by the end of high school, with college producing little additional improvement.<sup>34</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States, school textbooks were explicitly ideological and nationalist, promoting basic beliefs like patriotism, piety, a strong work ethic, a glorified, mythological history, and the perfection of the U.S.<sup>35</sup> At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, professional historians began to influence and standardize the curriculum, but the

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<sup>31</sup> "The news media increasingly help to provide the materials for the *informational* citizen, but they do not and cannot create the *informed* citizen. The informed citizen appears in a society in which being informed makes good sense, and that is a function not of individual character or news media performance, but of political culture..." (Schudson, 1995, 169) And political culture begins with education.

<sup>32</sup> Lee H. Ehman, "The American School in the Political Socialization Process," *Review of Educational Research* 50, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>33</sup> Mikael Persson, "Social Network Position Mediates the Effect of Education on Active Political Party Membership," *Party Politics* 20, no. 5 (2014); Jaime E. Settle et al., "The Social Origins of Adult Political Behavior," *American Politics Research* 39, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Highton, "Revisiting the Relationship between Educational Attainment and Political Sophistication," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 04 (2009). This refers only to a measurement of political sophistication, however; college can have other important effects on political ideology. For instance, one study found that social networks of affluent students at college spread social norms privileging profit-making, thereby shaping attitudes supportive of economic inequality (Mendelberg et al., forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004): 5-20.

inculcation of the same basic beliefs remained. The contemporaneous rise of large corporations led a coalition of Progressive educators, labor and corporate leaders, financiers, politicians, and political philosophers to reform the educational system: to turn away from an individualistic approach and toward one meant to adapt students to a role in a society transformed by the large, cooperative business organization.<sup>36</sup> The varied interests of these disparate groups soon clashed, however, with representatives and advocates of big business pushing for a school system directly serving the needs of corporations, and labor unions trying to inculcate an appreciation for the value of worker organization (the president of the National Association of Manufacturers called union influence on schools a “tarantula . . . on the bosom of an angel.”)<sup>37</sup> The corporate wing of the Progressive education reform movement largely won the clash, turning John Dewey’s desire to foster a sense of community and mutual understanding into the practice of fostering social pressure toward conformity.<sup>38</sup> Reformers like Edward Ross, Woodrow Wilson, and David Snedden viewed it unavoidable that the majority would need to be acclimated and prepared for the drudgery of the factory – in Ross’ words, this was “breaking in’ the colt to the harness” – and only a privileged few would require a more liberal education to prepare them for corporate, social, and political leadership.<sup>39</sup>

In the wake of the latter’s victory, radicals criticized the conservative ideology pressed upon students *and* the influence on school boards and officials big business was routinely exerting.<sup>40</sup> School boards were dominated by businessmen and professionals,

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<sup>36</sup> Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972): xi-xiii, 1-21.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-44, 60, 162-167.

<sup>39</sup> Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 277-283.

<sup>40</sup> Spring, *Education ... Corporate*, 126-148.

with laborers and women nearly absent. This domination of school leadership translated directly into the school curriculum and the *latent* curriculum, or how school life was organized. As Upton Sinclair wrote in 1923, “[o]ur educational system is not a public service, but an instrument of special privilege; its purpose is not to further the welfare of mankind, but merely to keep America capitalist.”<sup>41</sup>

By the 1930s, the Great Depression had sapped some of the power of big business, and the leftist wing of the Progressive reform movement briefly gained influence. Harold Rugg’s issue-oriented social science textbooks focusing on problems in American society began to be widely used.<sup>42</sup> This soon generated a backlash from conservatives and business groups (including the Hearst newspapers), who wanted a return to uncritical, my-country-right-or-wrong instruction. Regardless of the introduction (and then rollback) of more balanced content, the latent curriculum continued to stress conformity, and teachers were pressured by their communities to exclusively glorify the nation.<sup>43</sup>

The Cold War further chilled attempts to introduce a more balanced, objective history curriculum; now conservative business and community leaders could accuse would-be reformers not only of being unpatriotic, but treasonous communists as well. As Ronald Evans explains:

It matters little that many of the critics got the facts wrong. Their attacks often made front-page-headline news, through which media magnates and conservative critics manipulated a naive public. Too frequently the responses of educators, who had their fingers on the evidence, were buried in the back pages when they appeared at

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<sup>41</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education* (Pasadena CA: Published by the author, 1923): 18.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, *The Social Studies*, 59-69. See also Chapter 5, section vii, footnote 230.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-69.



all. It is also difficult to comprehend the cumulative power of red-baiting attacks, which reached their peak in the 1950s and undoubtedly played a major role in the decline of progressive social studies, the focus of many of the most extreme and inaccurate charges.<sup>44</sup>

The cumulative result was a return to the status quo of the 1900s: a history curriculum that glorified the nation, inculcated patriotism, and avoided criticism along with anything that could incite much interest or passion in the subject.<sup>45</sup> James Williams writes:

School textbooks tend to be aimed at broad consensus or at least maximum lack of offense to interest groups it seeks to engage. This is not to say that textbooks are not controversial; there is a rich literature on “textbook wars.” But much of the dullness of textbooks, at least in the United States, is that the rough edges that might have offended a powerful stakeholder group but also made for more interest, critical thinking, and discussion have been rubbed off. In contested societies, the social studies or history that everyone agrees on is probably not very interesting.<sup>46</sup>

As the business wing of the Progressive movement had wanted, U.S. schools in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were structured to produce obedient skilled workers. As one scholar lamented, “[m]ore of our citizens than we would like to think . . . do not want the schools to teach their children to think.”<sup>47</sup>

This pattern has been in evidence in much of the rest of the world, with reformers pushing for a more objective, critical history curriculum, and conservatives struggling to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup> James H. Williams, "School Textbooks and the State of the State," in *(Re) Constructing Memory: School Textbooks and the Imagination of the Nation*, ed. James H. Williams, 327-335 (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: SensePublishers, 2014): 328.

<sup>47</sup> Shirley Engle, quoted in Evans, *The Social Studies*, 173.

maintain the teaching of history as an exercise in national glorification to produce patriotic citizens.<sup>48</sup> Today, educational policymakers in the U.S., U.K., E.U., Japan, Singapore, and in international organizations promote *economic* nationalism, in an attempt to make their citizens tools of economic competitiveness in a global economy.<sup>49</sup> History textbooks in many countries seek to valorize the nation using a simple, “good guys and bad guys” narrative that changes along with the political environment.<sup>50</sup> Typical narratives include explaining away past evils committed by the national government as rare exceptions, the fault of others, unfortunate necessities, or simply ignoring them; making the national in-group seem special and superior to out-groups (and always getting *even better*); focusing on how the in-group suffered or was victimized in the past; and calling on the in-group to unite against an out-group threat or restore it to the greatness of an imagined past.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the single greatest institutional source of political socialization and knowledge other than the media tends to spread memes uncritically supportive of one’s nation. Instead of critical thinking, the latent curriculum promotes regimentation and task-orientation conducive to work as an employee, but lacking in the qualities required for democratic citizenship. Since the fostering of political sophistication ends in most cases with high school, citizens tend to enter political adulthood with a rosy picture-in-the-head of the nation. This schema (like all schemas) will tend to be resistant to change, even in the

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<sup>48</sup> Eckhardt Fuchs, "Current Trends in History and Social Studies Textbook Research," *Journal of International Cooperation and Education* 14, no. 2 (2011): 19; James H. Williams, "Nation, State, School, Textbook," in *(Re) Constructing Memory: School Textbooks and the Imagination of the Nation*, ed. James H. Williams, 1-9 (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: SensePublishers, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Global Economy* (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998): 150-153, 226. Yet there is little evidence that education in itself creates a globally-competitive national economy. As Boots Riley of The Coup put it in the song “Hip 2 Tha Skeme”: “If everybody in the ‘hood had a PhD / You’d say, ‘that doctor flipped that burger hella good for me!’”

<sup>50</sup> Williams, “School Textbooks,” 328; Spring, *Education ... Global*, 131-135

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-334.

face of information about one's government that lays bare its faults and instances of malfeasance. Without media literacy as part of the school curriculum, students are likely to absorb the already in-group-biased supply of information from the media, adding to and strengthening their generally positive schemas about their nation. Whatever critical information about their own government they do manage to encounter is likely to be difficult to assimilate, and will in any case tend to be avoided to prevent uncomfortable cognitive dissonance.

### **iii. Social evolution: Observations for epistemology**

*"Nothing is so passionate as a vested interest disguised as an intellectual conviction."*

- Sean O'Casey, "The White Plague"

*"Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of ideas."*

- Lord Acton, "Review of Sir Erskine May's *Democracy in Europe*"

The meme's eye view, or the perspective of socio-cultural evolution, is cause for a great deal of epistemological skepticism.<sup>52</sup> It points out the arbitrariness and contingency of our beliefs, as being the result of memes which happened to reproduce themselves in our brains. It forces the uncomfortable recognition that each of us would have entirely different beliefs had we merely inhabited a different environment (as Montaigne would say, on the other side of a mountain). It demands that we engage in foundationally critical thinking; in

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<sup>52</sup> The Lippmannite, media-centered view of political epistemology, while sharing much in common with a social evolution view, is if anything cause for even greater skepticism (Friedman, forthcoming).

light of our suboptimal rationality and the contingency of our beliefs, we must make constant good-faith attempts to debunk our own beliefs. That is, we must apply a falsificationist strategy against our beliefs, actively seeking out evidence that may undermine them – in effect, consciously swimming against the stream of our evolved psychology, which seeks to confirm our own beliefs.

Perhaps our brains are not populated with memes as absurd as the natural superiority of left-handers as revealed by a magical seahorse's ancient holy book; but the religions that do exist in billions of brains make claims that are no more warranted than those about a magical seahorse. Political beliefs may be subject to a greater reality constraint than religious faiths – the we-are-ruled-by-lizard-aliens political philosophy, for example, has not enjoyed much success – but a look at intellectual history since written records began reveals precious few political beliefs that we would *not* view today as ridiculous, chauvinist, or downright evil. Nonetheless, the fact that most political beliefs are not perfectly absurd provides little comfort. There is no avoiding that even the most well-read among us are radically ignorant, and that the realm of unknown unknowns dwarfs that of what we know and even what we know we do not know. Since our brains evolved to exhibit cognitive conservatism, treating our beliefs like prized possessions we are loathe to give up or replace, we must realize that our feeling of confidence in our beliefs is a universal illusion, and only rarely well-founded. And as Macaulay might have argued, whose opinion is to decide which beliefs are well-founded, and whose confidence in their beliefs is a deception? This epistemological quandary would be bad enough even if our brains were bias-free blank slates from birth; it is made worse in light of our evolved

political predispositions, our Left or Right psychology, our elective affinities for ideas promising equality and change or hierarchy and tradition.

Our ideas about any political issue are inherently contestable: a definitive answer to any of them is vanishingly unlikely, if only because social evolution is rarely in stasis. A definitive, correct answer at one moment is likely to be incorrect at the next moment in direct proportion to the change occurring in the interim. Adjudicating even the simplest political question is prey to radical ignorance, different sets of information held by opposing sides, the incommensurability of even the same (disembodied) information stored in different brains with emotional memories tied to it, and our evolved political predispositions. Every political argument shares in common the fate of every *legal* argument: “but the other side can argue that...” As in law, so in politics: the argument that carries the day is not necessarily the best-supported, but the one favored by the relevant authority, whether a judge or jury, the majority of voters or the government. And as Jonathan Swift wrote, lawyers “take special Care to record all the Decisions formerly made against common Justice and the general Reason of Mankind. These, under the name of *Precedents*, they produce as Authorities to justify the most iniquitous Opinions; and the Judges never fail of decreeing accordingly.”<sup>53</sup> Likewise, the dead hand of political history produces its own sort of iniquitous precedents, the basic beliefs and self-serving historical myths we are socialized with. In the face of this, a retreat into radical relativism or epistemological skepticism, even cynicism, is perfectly understandable.

Yet an absolute epistemological skepticism is not entirely warranted. Just as the process of motivated reasoning is impeded by so-called knowledge constraints (we cannot

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<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011): 279-280.

completely ignore contrary evidence, and at times it forces us to revise our beliefs), so too our political beliefs encounter reality constraints. We can no sooner believe that submission to the directives of an intergalactic empire is the best political-economic system than we can believe that the moon is made of Brie. Still, this is little comfort; the reality that can constrain our beliefs is too distant and immense to have any ideas *about* other than spooks. However, even with its distance and immensity, over time reality has asserted itself against our more fanciful political ideas, from the divine right of kings to the inferiority of certain “races” as created by God or nature. History is a graveyard of our more egregious spooks.<sup>54</sup>

The epistemology suggested by the evolution of ideas can offer little guidance as to choosing accurate beliefs. But the banal observation (made by most every first-year law student) that “a different argument could be made” or that “a counterargument is possible” warrants only a tired nod of assent; it does not warrant radical relativism or all-encompassing epistemological skepticism. The question is not *whether* an argument could be made – of course one *could* be made, an infinite number of different arguments can *always* be made – but whether an argument is better supported than any contrary argument. Of course, there are no judges on intellectual Mount Olympus who can observe the totality of relevant evidentiary support, and unerringly rule in favor of the best-supported argument. We have only radically ignorant human judges. Yet in spite of our unavoidably, immutably radical ignorance, our brains were “designed” to argue: millions of years of evolution have produced a species of innate lawyers, capable not only of crafting

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<sup>54</sup> This is not to suggest that the graveyard is full, and will not be added to as time passes. It is virtually guaranteed that many of the political ideas dominant today will end up discarded and considered ridiculous in the future. Just as the history of science is a graveyard of discarded theories, and our present theories are likely to be discarded one day.

arguments using the information one has, but also of choosing the most accurate and beneficial understandings of reality – again, given the information one has. Since our radical ignorance precludes us from choosing only the wisest and best among us to decide political questions, we are left with government by public opinion. Our only hope of making public opinion into a fine governor is to inform it. And since we know that we cannot be certain in the veracity of our own political beliefs, to *inform* public opinion can only mean to expose it to a diversity of political beliefs – and the memes which comprise them. Even so, this provides little guidance; it is merely saying that we are dexterous enough to pick them up after we “let the cards fall where they may” – only it is requiring that we use a full deck. But the evidence of demand-side, psychological biases provides something more. It cannot suggest which ideas are more likely to be true, but it does suggest which ideas are *less* likely to be true. Absent some mystical principle by which our evolved psychological biases actually incline us toward Truth (a wildly contradictory Truth – truths which are true only on one side of a mountain, and false on the other), we can confidently use them to determine which of our ideas deserve greater *skepticism* than others. As in constitutional jurisprudence, where different laws are given varying levels of scrutiny according to the interest of the state and their risk of encroaching upon fundamental rights, we can use our knowledge of psychological biases as a guide to determine our level of skepticism toward certain ideas. Exposing the pedigree of an idea may undercut some – the pedigree of the “race” meme being the most obvious example – but exposing the psychological bias *supportive* of an idea is more widely applicable. Once our skepticism has been heightened with regard to an idea, we should expend greater effort in attempting to refute it, or in finding and considering someone else’s refutation.

All psychological biases are irrational, strictly speaking, but some can be socially beneficial. We have biases toward equality and change or hierarchy and tradition, and while these are irrational to the extent that they derive from genetic endowments rather than analysis of evidence, they may be beneficial. In fact, these biases may be the cornerstone of social evolution: Left psychology provides a source of novel variation, and Right psychology provides longevity for the variants of the past. Nonetheless, we are likely to adopt and adhere to some ideas, to some extent, due to our psychological Left and Right biases. We would do well to submit ideas favored by our Left or Right psychology to greater scrutiny.

Other psychological biases are both irrational and harmful. In-group bias, while evolutionarily important in the abstract for its role in facilitating cooperation, is rationally indefensible in the majority of its manifestations. Being born in Borneo, Taiwan, or on a space station are all irrelevant – just as irrelevant as the color of one’s eyes, skin, hair, or clothes – to a determination of individual or group worth. The fact that in-group bias makes us likely to treat such irrelevant, arbitrary distinctions as important in determining political questions must give us pause: it is a rational error despite its evolutionary pedigree. *Is* does not imply *ought*. Nor can the commonness or even universality of this error confer it any authority. Rather, it demands suspicion: we must apply strict scrutiny to ideas that make our in-group, whether national, partisan, ideological, ethnic, or any other sort, seem praiseworthy. *Ceteris paribus*, we are more likely to adopt an idea if it paints our in-group in a pleasing light; hence all ideas we are exposed to which make us feel good about our ingroup deserve suspicion. And *only* suspicion: in-group bias is only one force among many influencing our adoption of ideas, and there are plenty of true ideas that also



make our in-groups look good. The United States was an inspiration for democrats the world over, despite its historical failure to live up to the ideal; Britain outlawed the practice of widow-burning in India, despite causing untold misery there and throughout its empire; and the Japanese empire freed millions from European colonialism, despite yoking them under its own domination. Hell, the Nazis wore sharp uniforms.

The system justification tendency is another irrational bias demanding the application of strict scrutiny. (System justification itself could be conceived as the application of strict scrutiny to proposals for system *change*, thereby irrationally favoring the status quo.) Ideas with a Panglossian air, those that support whatever status quo one happens to be living in, deserve more suspicion than ideas critical of it. *Ceteris paribus*, ideas supportive of one's government or political and economic system have an (irrational) advantage over critical ideas; apologetics are stickier than critiques. Hence, we should apply extra scrutiny to defenses of the status quo (and only scrutiny: an irrational *inclination* does not imply the absence of any rational reasons).

Studies of gene-culture coevolution have uncovered a "prestige bias" tending to push us into irrationally adopting ideas simply because they are held by those with wealth or high status. As with in-group bias, this has a clear evolutionary rationale: adopting ideas from highly-regarded fellow tribe members likely was an adaptive strategy for most of human history. Someone able to win the approbation of aggressive egalitarians likely had some useful ideas about food, predators, or social life. After the Lucky Sperm Club arose along with sedentary mass societies, however, high status from wealth went to a much broader class of people, whose ideas are just as likely to be beneficial as harmful, brilliant as moronic. (Think of the political ideas of Henry Ford, or Kim Kardashian.) *Ceteris paribus*,

the spooks of the rich are no better than the spooks of the poor or middle-class – yet we are more likely to adopt them under the influence of prestige bias (not to mention supply-side biases). Ideas favored by those with wealth or high status therefore deserve stricter scrutiny.

These sorts of irrational psychological biases are important for epistemology, the study of knowledge, and may also help explain its opposite: “agnotology,” or the study of ignorance.<sup>55</sup> While awareness of psychological biases can help *improve* epistemological practices in politics, they (along with supply-side biases) *explain* much about agnotology. The cigarette industry sowing doubt about the link between tobacco and cancer is a primarily an example of a supply-side bias: tobacco companies funding and disseminating research meant to persuade people that cigarettes might *not* be harmful. It also involved demand-side bias: smokers were more likely to accept manufactured doubt about the danger of the drug they used (through cognitive dissonance reduction, confirmation bias, and the pull of addiction). Both forms of bias produced widespread ignorance of the very real link between cancer and cigarettes. Suspicious ignorance is notable in the case of other drugs as well; as two legal scholars explained in their comprehensive history of marijuana prohibition:

The scientific propositions attending the application of the narcotics consensus to marijuana had always been assumptions tied to broader social perceptions of the using class. But these assumptions no longer coincided with social expectations when use of the drug was taken up by society’s privileged classes. The basic

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<sup>55</sup> Robert N. Proctor, “Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study),” in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, 1-33 (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

proposition that use inevitably became abuse was quickly challenged. ... This society's fear of drug dependence had by now reached the level of moral antipathy, and marihuana's innocence in this regard was an important revelation, even though the information had been available from the earliest prohibitory days. Similarly the causal relationships between marihuana and crime, idleness, and incapacitation were now more difficult to maintain. The new users were not 'criminals' or social outcasts. They were sons and daughters of the middle and upper classes. In short, when the consensus against marijuana lost its sociological support, it immediately lost its scientific support as well.<sup>56</sup>

When marijuana users were predominantly Black or Hispanic and poor, ignorance about the relative harmlessness of the drug was widespread. Once White college students began using it, the psychological biases of their parents switched: from out-group fear to cognitive dissonance reduction ("my child is good, so marijuana cannot be that bad"), once they gained some first-hand information about the drug. Some of these parents working in government and research institutions then changed the supply-side equation, disseminating more widely what had always been known about the drug.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Richard J. Bonnie and Charles H. Whitebread II, *The Marijuana Conviction: A History of Marijuana Prohibition in the United States* (New York: The Lindesmith Center, 1999): 225.

<sup>57</sup> The Nixon administration did not display ignorance so much as outright cynicism. Nixon's own commission to study marijuana policy recommended decriminalization (Bonnie and Whitebread, 1999, 255-273), but his domestic policy advisor John Erlichman later revealed:

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. ... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did. (Quoted in Baum, 2016)

Another example is that of climate change.<sup>58</sup> Military-funded research in the 1940s predicted dangerous global warming, but military secrecy kept these findings from being publicly disseminated (a supply-side bias).<sup>59</sup> As other scientists and institutions began to openly publish similar findings, demand-side biases (cognitive consistency, system justification) entered the picture: believers in free-market ideology opposed the science because it suggested government intervention into the economy to solve a dire problem caused by the free market itself.<sup>60</sup> This then fed back into a supply-side bias, as free-market fundamentalists took a page from Big Tobacco's playbook and began funding and disseminating research meant to cast doubt on climate change.

Of course, ignorance is rife in the political realm, which Jeffrey Friedman describes as "a cacophony of confident voices that unwittingly express factual ignorance, theoretical ignorance, ignorance of logic, ignorance of their own possible ignorance, ignorance of their opponents' possible ignorance; and, in consequence, dogmatism, demagoguery, and demonization."<sup>61</sup> But the ignorance of agnotology is of a yet another sort, suggesting partially-hidden or submerged knowledge on the demand side – a result of self-deception – and conscious attempts to spread ignorance (or doubt) on the supply side (facilitated by other psychological biases, like in-group bias).<sup>62</sup> Charles Mills has explored agnotology in liberal political philosophy, demonstrating how classical liberals displayed a shocking

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<sup>58</sup> Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, "Challenging Knowledge: How Climate Science Became a Victim of the Cold War," in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, 55-89 (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Proctor, "Agnotology," 19.

<sup>60</sup> "To accept that the free market may be creating profound problems that it cannot solve would be ... 'ideologically shattering.' When scientific knowledge challenged their worldview, these men responded by challenging that knowledge." (Oreskes and Conway, 2008, 80)

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Friedman, "Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance," *Critical Review* 17, no. 1 (2005): xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>62</sup> Cohen, *States of Denial*, 4-5.

degree of ignorance about how their purportedly universal philosophy was in practice applied only to Whites.<sup>63</sup> He has identified the key variable of political epistemology and agnotology as *power*:

[T]he conceptual array with which the cognizer approaches the world needs itself to be scrutinized for its adequacy to the world, for how well it maps the reality it claims to be describing. If the society is one structured by relations of domination and subordination (as of course most societies in recent human history have been), then in certain areas this conceptual apparatus is likely going to be shaped in various ways by the biases of the ruling groups.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, economic and political power is the preponderant influence in the ecology of information. It brings with it its own demand biases, which readily enter supply as well. Perhaps Mark Twain should have written instead that whenever you find yourself on the side of the *powerful*, it is time to pause and reflect.

#### **iv. Power**

*"There is something about power that distorts judgments more or less. The chances that a powerful person will make an error are much greater than those of a weak person. Power has recourse to its own resources. Weakness must draw on reason. All other things being equal, it is always true that those who govern have opinions which are less just, less sane, less impartial than those whom they govern."*

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<sup>63</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract*. Besides ignoring this gross hypocrisy, another strategy some classical liberals employed was to argue that slavery was a tacit contract between master and slave (for mutual benefit), on par with the tacit consent of the social contract (Ellerman, 2015, 6-7).

<sup>64</sup> Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, 230-249 (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2008): 236.

- Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*

*"Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority..."*

- Lord Acton, Letter to Mandell Creighton (1887)

One of the darker aspects of power is that it attracts psychopaths in particular.<sup>65</sup> In addition, psychopaths' peculiar mix of traits, abilities, and deficiencies helps them *attain* power.<sup>66</sup> As one study found, psychopaths are more prevalent at senior than junior levels of corporations.<sup>67</sup> A theory even posits that the Great Financial Crisis was caused in large part by psychopaths – acting in their typically selfish, risky, and destructive manner – at top levels of major corporations and financial firms.<sup>68</sup> (In a nod to Brett Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*, there is even anecdotal evidence that at least one major investment bank used psychometric testing to *recruit* psychopaths for senior corporate finance positions.)<sup>69</sup> If psychopaths tend to be more power-seeking than average, and psychopathic traits tend to lead to success in climbing the corporate (or political) ladder, then we would expect to find psychopaths – who make up an estimated 1% of the general population – to be overrepresented in positions of power, as they are in prison.<sup>70</sup> One could certainly

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Shedler and Drew Westen, "Refining Personality Disorder Diagnosis: Integrating Science and Practice," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 161, no. 8 (2004): 1363.

<sup>66</sup> And, potentially, be successful at wielding it: one aspect of psychopathy, "fearless dominance," has been found to correlate with measures of success for U.S. presidents (Lilienfeld, et al., 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Clive R.P. Boddy et al., "Leaders without Ethics in Global Business: Corporate Psychopaths," *Journal of Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>68</sup> Clive R. Boddy, "The Corporate Psychopaths Theory of the Global Financial Crisis," *Journal of Business Ethics* 102, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>69</sup> Brian Basham, "Beware Corporate Psychopaths – They Are Still Occupying Positions of Power," *The Independent* (December 28, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Robert D. Hare, "Psychopathy as a Risk Factor for Violence," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1999): 186.

speculate that a disproportionately large proportion of psychopaths at top levels of government and corporations explains some of the dire political and economic outcomes we have long witnessed.

Yet such a hypothesis would be superfluous. We have created institutions that themselves exhibit psychopathic characteristics.<sup>71</sup> U.S. corporate law *requires* incorporated businesses to act like psychopaths in certain respects: to abjure any concern with social or community good, and focus myopically on amassing money. Should a corporate person decide to display any unprofitable empathy (and spend money on it), shareholders are able to sue. Thankfully, the government is governed by laws that better comport with our (non-psychopaths, that is) morality. But in the area of foreign policy, traditional conceptions of international relations (how the state should interact with the world) are a different pressure tending to produce another institutional form of psychopath. Particularly “realist” theory, which makes psychopathy into a virtue: do anything the meanest rat bastard would *not* do, it counsels, and you invite national destruction.<sup>72</sup> (Just as in the investment bank’s human resources hiring strategy: do as the meanest rat bastard would do, and you guarantee greater profits.)

In these examples, as with a free, commercial media system whose output mimics that of a government-controlled propaganda system, evil outcomes are not the result of evil intentions. They are the result of an invisible hand: the aggregate forces, pressures, and tendencies in a certain type of human ecology, whether the business world, the foreign policy establishment, or the media system. Adam Smith’s “unseen hand” referred both to

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<sup>71</sup> Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> Which, admittedly, may very well have been true for a large portion of recent (<10,000 years) history. (Tang, 2013, 58-93)

the force of self-interest and the force of morality, which Smith conceptualized as the desire to conform to the judgments of others in the society.<sup>73</sup> Smith wrote during a time when corporations were banned in England (in reaction to the Enron of the day, the South Sea Company's collapse); he recognized that the professional managers of corporations would not run their businesses in the way a baker or butcher (or partnership) would – they would lack the pressure of moral conformity.<sup>74</sup> Just as psychopaths do not intuitively *feel* our evolved sense of morality that produces conformity to social norms, psychopathic institutions lack structural features that might impose conformity to social morality. Institutions *with* such features would obviate any worry about psychopathic individuals within them: their individual (immoral) intentions would matter less once constrained by countervailing institutional pressure. This pressure would ensure that to do well, one would have to do good – regardless of motives and intentions. Defending Marcus Aurelius against the charge of narcissism, “that all his life he was just, laborious, beneficent out of vanity, and that his virtues served only to dupe mankind,” Voltaire wrote: “Dear god, give us often such rascals!”<sup>75</sup>

But even in the face of morally-appropriate institutional design, power remains a force capable of skewing the ecology of information and producing immoral outcomes. Power is the creation of institutions: it is what control of an institution grants an individual. As such, it is both a supply-side bias (the institution and its effects once wielded) and a demand-side bias, since it affects our psychology in profound ways. The science fiction writer Douglas Adams observed: “It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some other

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<sup>73</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 298, 398-399.

<sup>74</sup> Bakan, *The Corporation*, 6, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 400.



creature, without forming an opinion about them. ... On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, every day, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thought about them whatsoever."<sup>76</sup> This is supported by psychological research: power reduces our ability to understand how others see the world, adopt others' perspectives, take into account others' knowledge or lack thereof, and intuit others' emotions.<sup>77</sup>

Like all psychological biases, that produced by power is invisible, subconscious. Max Weber was correct "that in every such situation he who is more favored feels the never ceasing need to look upon his position as in some way 'legitimate,' upon his advantage as 'deserved,' and the other's disadvantage as being brought about by the latter's 'fault.' That the purely accidental causes of the difference may be ever so obvious makes no difference."<sup>78</sup> Psychological bias is immune to the obvious. Paulo Friere provides a richer description:

"[E]ven when the contradiction [between the oppressed and their oppressors] is resolved authentically by a new situation established by the liberated laborers, the former oppressors do not feel liberated. On the contrary, they genuinely consider themselves to be oppressed. Conditioned by the experience of oppressing others, any situation other than their former seems to them like oppression. Formerly, they could eat, dress, wear shoes, be educated, travel, and hear Beethoven; while millions did not eat, had no clothes or shoes, neither studied nor traveled, much less listened to Beethoven. Any restriction on this way of life, in the name of the rights of the

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<sup>76</sup> Douglas Adams, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (New York: Gallery Books, 2014): 5.

<sup>77</sup> Adam D. Galinsky et al., "Power and Perspectives Not Taken," *Psychological Science* 17, no. 12 (2006); Dacher Keltner et al., "Power, Approach, and Inhibition," *Psychological Review* 110, no. 2 (2003): 265-284.

<sup>78</sup> Max Weber, *Law in Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1978): 953.

community, appears to the former oppressors as a profound violation of their individual right — although they had no respect for the millions who suffered and died of hunger, pain, sorrow, and despair. For the oppressors, “human beings” refers only to themselves; other people are “things.”<sup>79</sup>

The classical liberals agreed; only they felt that the pain experienced by the former oppressors would be greater than the pleasure enjoyed by the formerly oppressed.<sup>80</sup> Yet by utilitarian logic, the relatively greater pain of the minority would likely be overwhelmed (in total) by the relatively lesser pleasure (and reduction in pain) of the majority.

If power is defined as the ability to exercise one’s will, then in market societies where most everything one desires may be purchased, wealth is a rather direct proxy for power.<sup>81</sup> Unsurprisingly, the psychological effects of wealth mimic those of power: wealth reduces our ability to empathize with others,<sup>82</sup> leading to a style of moral judgments<sup>83</sup> similar to that of psychopaths.<sup>84</sup> It makes us feel more entitled, and leads to greater narcissism.<sup>85</sup> A study of lottery winners found that a sudden windfall of money made them less egalitarian and more supportive of rightwing political parties, in direct proportion to the amount of money won.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 297.

<sup>81</sup> Do you will that others serve you? Hire servants and assistants. Do you will to be the lord of your own land? Buy an island, stock it with workers. Do you will to be secure, or make others insecure? Contract with a private mercenary firm – and so on.

<sup>82</sup> Michael W. Kraus, et al., "Social Class, Contextualism, and Empathic Accuracy," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (2010).

<sup>83</sup> Stéphane Côté, et al., "For Whom Do the Ends Justify the Means? Social Class and Utilitarian Moral Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>84</sup> Michael Koenigs et al., "Utilitarian Moral Judgment in Psychopathy," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 7, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>85</sup> Paul K. Piff, "Wealth and the Inflated Self: Class, Entitlement, and Narcissism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>86</sup> Nattavudh Powdthavee and Andrew J. Oswald, "Does Money Make People Right-Wing and Inegalitarian? A Longitudinal Study of Lottery Winners," *Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 7934* (January 2014).

Little wonder then, given the demand-side bias of wealth and power, that the wealthiest 1% in the U.S. has starkly different political beliefs than those of the 99%. They are more concerned about government deficits, more favorable to cutting taxes and social welfare programs (health care, the earned income tax credit, social security, minimum wage, government jobs programs, education), less favorable to increasing government regulation of corporations and redistributing wealth or income, and less concerned with inequality.<sup>87</sup> And in the U.S. political system, the wealthy mostly get what they want, while the government is non-responsive to the desires of the non-wealthy.<sup>88</sup> Evidence shows that elected officials do not even bother learning what the electorate wants.<sup>89</sup> Why should they: wealth can buy elections *to* Congress,<sup>90</sup> and votes *in* Congress.<sup>91</sup> (And control of the U.S. government confers great influence over supranational institutions like the World Bank and United Nations.)<sup>92</sup> Insufficient money is ever so much a bar to holding public office in the U.S. as the “wrong” ideology is in Iran or China.<sup>93</sup>

Private power is not *greater* than public power so much as it *constitutes* public power; government is a Leviathan to the people, a tool for the wealthy.<sup>94</sup> As Machiavelli noted, a political system professing the basic equality of citizens in the face of patent

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<sup>87</sup> Benjamin I. Page et al., "Democracy and the Policy Preferences," 67.

<sup>88</sup> Larry M. Bartels, "Economic Inequality and Political Representation," in *The Unsustainable American State*, ed. Lawrence Jacobs and Desmond King, 167-196 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gilens and Page, "Testing Theories."

<sup>89</sup> David E. Broockman and Christopher Skovron, "What Politicians Believe about Their Constituents: Asymmetric Misperceptions and Prospects for Constituency Control," working paper, University of California Berkeley and University of Michigan (2015).

<sup>90</sup> Fuller, *Beasts and Gods*, 95-96.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Stratmann, "Can Special Interests Buy Congressional Votes? Evidence from Financial Services Legislation," *Journal of Law and Economics* 45, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>92</sup> Fuller, *Beasts and Gods*, 279-281.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 255-256.

inequalities is in need of a fig leaf: nationalism.<sup>95</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa brilliantly defined “nation” as

that ridiculous politico-administrative contrivance manufactured by statist greedy for power and intellectuals in search of a master, that is, a Maecenas, that is, a pair of prebendal tits to suck on – [it] is a dangerous but effective excuse for the countless wars that have devastated the planet, for despotic impulses that have sanctified the domination of the weak by the strong, and for an egalitarian smoke screen whose noxious fumes, indifferent to human beings, clone them and impose on them, under the guise of something essential and irremediable, the most accidental of common denominators: one's place of birth.<sup>96</sup>

However, the smoke screen of nationalism is looking relatively thin among the Millennial generation in the U.S.<sup>97</sup> It is an open question how well a grossly-unequal democracy will fare without it. But what is clear is that the U.S. government, modeled after ancient Rome, is on the same terminal trajectory as the Roman empire: threatened by the rapacity of its elite, widening inequality, social disintegration, and the projection of military power around the world.<sup>98</sup>

One can be forgiven for concluding that vulgar Marxism is in effect.<sup>99</sup> The demand-side bias produced by power fashions the link between class interest and ideology, and the disproportionate influence the wealthy exert over the media, political, and education

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>96</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011): 170.

<sup>97</sup> Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election, Section 4: Views of the Nation” (November 3, 2011).

<sup>98</sup> Fuller, *Beasts and Gods*, 238-242, 254-255, 272-273, 341; Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 600.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Moore, “I’m Starting to Think that the Left Might Actually Be Right,” *The Telegraph*, July 22, 2011. “[A]s Bob Fitch liked to say, vulgar Marxism explains 90% of what goes on in the world.” (Henwood, 2012).

systems creates supply-side biases influencing elections. Of course the electorate has *proximate* power over the government through the vote. In a lopsided debate between the comedian George Carlin and James Glassman, the (later) founding executive director of the George W. Bush Institute, Carlin advised Glassman to “forget these foolish elections; the owners of this country don’t care about the poor in general” – to which Glassman retorted: “Is this Karl Marx talking to me? The *owners* of this country are the *voters* of this country.” Carlin replied: “Learn a little something: elections and politicians are in place in order to give Americans the *illusion* of freedom of choice. You don’t really have freedom of choice in this country.”<sup>100</sup>

The evidence favors the comedian over the statesman. The voters are the owners of the country in the same sense that shareholders are the owners of a corporation whose CEO presents them with annual reports giving them misleadingly, fraudulently biased information. Voters are the proximate owners; the ultimate owners are those who control the supply of information voters can easily, cheaply access. And policy-relevant information is cheaper for businesses to obtain, since voters must pay in time and money for it, while businesses acquire it in the daily course of operations.<sup>101</sup> Information drives a wide gap between proximate and ultimate control, explaining why the government does not serve the “median voter” but only those investment blocs that can afford the exorbitant costs of campaigning; without money, reason, discussion, and persuasion avail one nothing.<sup>102</sup> “The

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<sup>100</sup> George Carlin and James Glassman, “George Carlin on Hurricane Katrina,” YouTube Video, 0:44, from *Real Time with Bill Maher*, posted by Jake Favre (January 25, 2010).

<sup>101</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 29.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 381-406. Like the Marxist error of conflating class identity with *knowledge* of class interest, the marginal voter theory, along with retrospective voting, “is remarkably innocent in its approach to the real-life political economy of information. For at bottom, the view takes voters’ judgments of a regime’s policy success [and the political options available] to be essentially incorrigible. It thus succumbs to what might be termed the ‘fallacy of immaculate perception.’” As a result of this fallacy, “modern students of politics resemble adherents of Ptolemy in a Copernican world ... the now

electorate is not too stupid or too tired to control the political system. It is merely too poor.”<sup>103</sup> Delving into the byzantine array of recent campaign finance records, Tom Ferguson concludes: “What both major investors and candidates have long known intuitively—that a relatively small number of giant sources provide most of the funding for successful major party candidates—is true. The relatively thin stream of small contributions simply does not suffice to float (conventionally managed) national campaigns, and all insiders know it.”<sup>104</sup>

The power of wealth exerts its pull in politics and the media, and also in the academy. Supply-side biases enter through grants from foundations and institutes named after their philanthropist founders (and funders), resulting in the production of analyses that seem less like political *science* and more like apologetics for the status quo.<sup>105</sup> In international relations scholarship, power pulls more directly.<sup>106</sup> And as in 1984, even the field of history is left with the telltale mark of power as a selection pressure exerted through money, as Gore Vidal acerbically writes:

Tenure is at stake in some cases, while prizes, grants, fellowships, hang in a balance that can go swiftly crashing if any of us dares question openly the image of America the beautiful on its hill, so envied by all that it is subject to attacks by terrorists who cannot bear so much sheer goodness to triumph in a world that belongs to *their* master, the son of morning himself, Satan.<sup>107</sup>

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fashionable ‘rational choice’ approaches to analyzing electoral systems produced not rigor but mortis.” (Ferguson, 1995, 9)

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 384, emphasis removed.

<sup>104</sup> Ferguson et al., “Party Competition,” 19.

<sup>105</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 9. Yet even these are currently being crushed by the tightening constraint of observable reality (e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2016).

<sup>106</sup> Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (London: Verso, 2015): 155-157.

<sup>107</sup> Gore Vidal, *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001): 292.

Of course, poverty does not grant wisdom, and wealth does not guarantee a distorted ideology.<sup>108</sup> Malevolent motives or character do not need to be imputed; again, the ecology of our minds (psychology) interacting with the ecology of information (media, schools) produces its effects with or without human intentionality. Hence, not only are we more likely to adopt ideas of the powerful due to “prestige bias” operating within our psychology; we are also more likely to adopt the ideas of the powerful due to their influence over supply. *Ceteris paribus*, ideas favored and promoted by the powerful must be given stricter scrutiny.

## **v. Economics**

*“¡La economía es de gente, no de curvas!” – “Economics is about people, not curves!”*

- Graffiti on a Madrid campus

To create a distinction between good (“supporting” of the ideals it purports to embody) and bad (“undermining” of the ideals it purports to embody) propaganda, the philosopher Jason Stanley took a step back to acknowledge that judgments about propaganda are unavoidably ideological: “If a neutral stance means a stance without

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<sup>108</sup> As Marx wrote:

To prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. I paint the capitalist and the landowner in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My stand-point, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them. (Marx, 1915, 15)

Similarly, the standpoint of this book – from which ideas are viewed as the product of evolution – can less than any other make the individual responsible for the memes that happened to reproduce themselves in one’s brain. Nor can it allow for *certainty* about the truth of memes in one’s own brain, or that of another.

ideological belief, then the neutral stance is a myth.”<sup>109</sup> We all have ideological beliefs, spooks:

The fact that there is no neutral stance cannot lead us to political paralysis, or to skepticism about political and moral reality. It is an error to try to evade the facts of our epistemic limitations by adopting metaphysical antirealism. We must come to terms with the fact of our limited perspective while occupying that very perspective.

There is simply no other way.<sup>110</sup>

So too this book must perforce occupy an ideological perspective. There is no objective perspective possible – only the objectivity of idiots (in the classical Greek sense of one who is removed from public affairs).

To some readers, this entire argument may seem like a tempest in a teapot. “Sure,” they might say, “there are problems with our media systems, and they might not be ideal – but what tragedy have they caused?” It is for this reason that the majority of media critics occupy a position to the Right or Left of the ideological spectrum in the media system itself: only they can see what is missing, and what effects the absence may cause. This section and the next will briefly introduce some of what is missing, and what effects the absence may cause.

We have already seen how media reports on economic issues hew closely to economic orthodoxy, particularly to the views of financial market participants and central bankers.<sup>111</sup> This would be less of a problem if economic orthodoxy were like dominant paradigms in the natural sciences. But as Robert Sidelsky explains, economics is different:

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<sup>109</sup> Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 77.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>111</sup> Chapter 4, section ix.; Chapter 5, section x.



“much more so than in physics, the research agenda and structure of power within the profession reflect the structure of power outside it. They have the character of ideologies.”<sup>112</sup> Of course they would; holders of economic power have no interest in shaping physics or chemistry – but the science of the very source of their power is another matter. This reflection of the power outside economics forces us to ask:

Who finances the institutions from which ideas spring? Who finances the dissemination of ideas in popular form – media, think tanks? What are the incentives facing the producers, disseminators, and popularisers of ideas even in a society in which discussion is 'free'? In short, what is the agenda of business? It is reasonable to see business as the hard power behind the soft power of ideas, not because the business community speaks with one voice, or because there are not other centres of hard power (e.g. government) but because it is the main source of the money without which the intellectual estate would wither and die.<sup>113</sup>

This hard selection pressure (among others) has shaped the field of economics since its inception. Robert Babe observes: “At every stage of its evolution, mainstream economics has been aligned with, and has doctrinally served, a class interest.”<sup>114</sup> Or, when the interests of various businesses in a country were sufficiently uniform, national interest would subsume class interest as the master of economics. For example, Sophus Reinert traces a forgotten British protectionist treatise through time and translations into several

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<sup>112</sup> Robert Skidelsky, "The Crisis of Capitalism: Keynes versus Marx," *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 45, no. 3 (2010): 323.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>114</sup> Robert E. Babe, "Political Economy of Economics," in *Media, Structures, and Power: The Robert E. Babe Collection*, ed. Edward A. Connor, 388-393 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011): 389.

European languages from an explicitly evolutionary perspective.<sup>115</sup> First published in 1695, John Cary's *Essay on the State of England* argued for the encouragement of high value-added domestic manufacturing by imposing tariffs on foreign goods and restrictions on exports of raw materials; while this could increase prices of manufactured goods, it was more than made up for by an increase in wages across the economy.<sup>116</sup> Once implemented, this policy served England well, turning it into a manufacturing powerhouse. Yet England refused to preach what it practiced; instead, the British government sought to kick away the ladder it had itself climbed to economic greatness, preaching instead that only free trade and open markets brought wealth.<sup>117</sup>

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “‘free trade’ simply meant England’s freedom to export manufactured goods in exchange for foreign raw materials, a practice oxymoronicallly known as ‘free trade imperialism.’”<sup>118</sup> Yet British economists like Adam Smith<sup>119</sup> and David

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<sup>115</sup> Sophus A. Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011): 9, 232. “Though prone to genetic drift and random mutations, books adapt to changing habitats like species, but ideas, like components of biological organisms tailored to specific ecologies, don’t all travel equally well. To be concrete, Cary’s comments about ‘Popish cut-throats’ were as likely to survive in Catholic Europe as a panda in a volcano.” They were removed in translation years later; ironically, “when Pius VI sought ways to rejuvenate the economy of the Papal States on the eve of Napoleon’s invasion, his advisor Paolo Vergani too chose the authority of the great ‘Gioanni Carij’ [John Cary] over that of ‘Adamo Smith.’”

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

<sup>118</sup> Reinert, *Translating Empire*, 279.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 283. “Scholars and laypeople alike continue to be obsessed by Adam Smith, but by the most lenient standards of historical evidence, we must accept that he was a treacherous guide to his age. For he was either eerily duplicitous or remarkably ignorant in claiming that ‘every town and country . . . in proportion as they have opened their ports to all nations, instead of being ruined by this free trade, as the principles of the commercial system would lead us to expect, have been enriched by it.’ Too many cities and states had been impoverished through trade by 1776 to allow for alternative explanations. In effect, the extent to which Smith was off the mark cannot but invoke doubts about the Scotsman’s intentions. In the text known as the *Early Draft of the Wealth of Nations* he warned that ‘a nation is not always in a condition to imitate and copy the inventions and improvements of its more wealthy neighbours; the application of these frequently requiring a stock with which it is not furnished.’ That he decided to cut this truism in favor of conjectures about the universal benefits of international trade is telling with regard to the nature of his enterprise.”

Ricardo<sup>120</sup> pointedly ignored the reality that Britain's success was owed to the protectionism advocated by Cary, along with its imperial depredations around the world. (As Michael Hudson archly observes, "gunboats do not appear in Ricardian trade theory," and "[w]hen the Native Americans refused to submit to the plantations system and its personal servitude, armed appropriation of their land drastically reduced their 'factor proportions.'")<sup>121</sup> Economic ideas evolve to serve power, including by avoiding information that cannot be used for the purpose. When England needed to catch up, Cary's protectionism held sway; when England held a lead, protectionism continued in practice but was jettisoned in theory, and a new crop of economists arose to preach "do as we say, not as we do" to the world. Luckily for several other European countries like Germany, these new economic doctrines were largely ignored (until, following England's example, they became sufficiently developed to afford free trade and preach it to less-developed others).<sup>122</sup>

As time went by, even Smith and Ricardo lost favor. They and other classical economists adhered to the labor theory of value, which Karl Marx later used as the foundation of his theory that capitalist profits comprised *surplus* value expropriated from

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 284-285. Ricardo advocated that no country "should seek to catch up with industrial England because it did not matter what a country produced; there were no differential returns in economics and market mechanisms would automatically ensure a fair and optimal distribution of wealth and power. So it was not inherently better to specialize in one economic activity rather than another. And it is conspicuous that Ricardo used the examples of Portugal and England to prove his theory. For at the time, the former's comparative advantage lay precisely in being poorer and dependent on the latter. Schumpeter wrote of Ricardo's efforts that 'it is an excellent theory that can never be refuted and lacks nothing save sense.' But for anyone wishing to devote the time and energy to consult the historical record, it is eminently refutable."

<sup>121</sup> Michael Hudson, *Trade, Development, and Foreign Debt: How Trade and Development Concentrate Economic Power in the Hands of Dominant Nations* (Kansas City MO: ISLET, 2009): 29, 116.

<sup>122</sup> This pattern was repeated by the United States and Japan. As late as 1988, a top Japanese trade official argued: "When you go hunting, you have to shoot at a target. But your neoclassical school of economics says you can fire in all directions at once, and the 'market' will insure you hit the target. Well, we don't accept that line of reasoning..." (Kristof, 1998)

laborers.<sup>123</sup> Even worse, Marx tied the labor theory of value and classical economics to a prediction that economic evolution would inevitably proceed to socialism. This would not do:

The use to which Marx put Ricardo's labor theory of value rendered it anathema... After the 1870s, just as Europe initiated a new colonialist expansion that culminated in World War I, orthodox economists stopped theorizing about the stages of development and its foreign-policy aspects. So inextricably had Marx identified the evolution of capitalism with the emergence of socialist institutions that the minds of orthodox economists snapped shut. A kind of fatalism, epitomized by the factor endowment view of comparative advantage, supplanted doctrines of active government development strategy. In advocating the avoidance of active government policy, economists dropped their concerns with technology and productivity. Henceforth their theories were marginal in a pejorative sense.<sup>124</sup>

The labor theory of value was replaced by the theory of "marginal utility" – a theory of marginal utility in a pejorative sense – which was far more soothing to the wealthy. Instead of value deriving from labor, the theory posited that value derived from subjective preferences. As such – *mirabile dictu!* – there could be no unjust expropriation of labor in the economy, since the marketplace merely expressed the aggregate desires of interchangeable individuals, and compensated everyone in accordance with how well they

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<sup>123</sup> E.K. Hunt and Mark Lautzenheiser, *History of Economic Thought: A Critical Perspective* (New Delhi: PHI Learning, 2011): 276-279.

<sup>124</sup> Hudson, *Trade, Development*, 206, 219.

met the desires of other market participants.<sup>125</sup> Neoclassical economics was born then, and as if in reward for its services, remains to this day.<sup>126</sup>

Politics has entered rather directly into the battle of paradigms in economics.<sup>127</sup> At the turn of the century, economists whose work pointed out problems with capitalist economies were denounced as traitorous socialists, denied jobs, or forced to resign; some became neoclassicists themselves. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the neoclassical school included a focus on the distribution of income and material welfare instead of “preferences.” But after a brief spell during which the Great Depression rudely forced a degree of reality upon the Pollyannaish neoclassical vision of capitalism, and World War II demonstrated the effectiveness of massive government intervention into the economy, the field soon retrenched in an ideological fantasyland. With the beginning of the Cold War, government and private funding for economics favored a version of economics as apologetics for capitalism, to be used in ideological warfare against the Soviets.

[I]t was not an improvement of knowledge or tools that led to the shift from classical and institutional economics to today’s “antigovernment-neoclassical-rational choice” mainstream. It was the result of a redefinition of what economics should be concerned with – from a fair to an efficient allocation of resources – an effort that was generously funded

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<sup>125</sup> Babe, “Political Economy,” 391-392. For instance, John Bates Clark, an early neoclassical economist, openly acknowledged that the new paradigm would muzzle the charge that workers “are regularly robbed of what they produce. This is done by the natural working of competition. If this charge were proved, every right-minded man should become a socialist.” As Norbert Häring and Niall Douglas argue, “[t]his quote may explain why his new theory was met with such enthusiastic support and had such lasting impact, despite a few rather fundamental shortcomings and contradictions” in the theory. (Häring and Douglas, 2012, 6)

<sup>126</sup> Besides its service to both wealthy individuals and nations, neoclassical economics owes some of its success to a welcoming ecology of ideas, in particular Progressivism and Protestantism. See Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park PA: Penn State Press, 2001).

<sup>127</sup> Norbert Häring and Niall Douglas, *Economists and the Powerful: Convenient Theories, Distorted Facts, Ample Rewards* (New York: Anthem Press, 2012): 8-46.

by businessmen and the military in the name of cementing the power and legitimacy of their selves and their beliefs within society in a post-1929 Depression ideological Cold War world.<sup>128</sup>

Today, neoclassical economics has received withering (and unanswered) criticism from many quarters, from within and without the field.<sup>129</sup> (Nonetheless, its dominance has only recently begun to be challenged by a mix of heterodox approaches.)<sup>130</sup> Most fundamentally, its worse-than-worthlessness is a direct consequence of the limited methods it allows. Tony Lawson explains:

The essence of contemporary mainstream economics does not lie at the level of substantive theory as most of its critics suggest, but at the level of methodology. Specifically, the most fundamental feature is a generalized insistence on the deductivist mode of explanation, including an unsustainable commitment to the ‘whenever this then that’ structure of ‘laws’. And it is in this very essence that the perpetual disarray of the subject is rooted. For, while the generalized usefulness of deductivism is dependent upon a ubiquity of closed systems, the social world, the object of social study, is fundamentally open and seemingly unsusceptible to

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>129</sup> For a selection, see Friedman, *No Exit*, Chapter 4; see also Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics: The Naked Emperor of the Social Sciences* (Annandale, Australia: Pluto Press, 2001); Yves Smith, *Econned: How Unenlightened Self Interest Undermined Democracy and Corrupted Capitalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>130</sup> John B. Davis, "The Turn in Economics: Neoclassical Dominance to Mainstream Pluralism?" *Journal of Institutional Economics* 2, no. 01 (2006); however, see Frederic S. Lee, "The Research Assessment Exercise, the State and the Dominance of Mainstream Economics in British Universities," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 31, no. 2 (2007). Hopefully, this process of diversifying economics will proceed faster than the Planck Principle, but older economists will be difficult to sway. "They may think they would be losing their scientific virtue, but it would be more correct to say that they would be abandoning their scientific hypocrisy." (Nelson, 2001, 229)

scientifically interesting local closures, or at least to closures of the degree of strictness that contemporary methods of economics require.<sup>131</sup>

Lawson's critique is primarily philosophical, but common sense – Jesus' advice to judge a tree by its fruits – would arrive at the same conclusion. Mainstream economics has not yet found an equilibrium between Panglossian irrelevance and catastrophic failures, the most recent of which prompted even the Queen of England to ask "why?"<sup>132</sup>

Yet the failures this methodological kneecapping has produced may continue on into the future, since the selection pressure of needing to be ideologically congenial and useful to the wealthy has thus far proven stronger than the selection pressure for a science capable of providing policy guidance for an equitable and sustainable form of economy.<sup>133</sup> After all, from the perspective of those benefitting from the financialization of the economy, the epistemic failure of mainstream economics is not a bug – it is a feature.<sup>134</sup> As two economic historians put it, "[t]he price for maintaining such a view has always been to ignore or deny all significant social problems and all significant social conflicts" – an attractively low price for those unaffected by such problems and conflicts – while "[t]he

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<sup>131</sup> Lawson, *Economics and Reality*, 282.

<sup>132</sup> In response, heterodox economist Thomas Palley wrote the Queen:

The failure was due to the sociology of the economics profession. This failure was a long time in the making and was the product of the profession becoming increasingly arrogant, narrow, and closed minded. One was compelled to adhere to the dominant ideological construction of economics or face exclusion. That was the mindset of the IMF and the World Bank with their "Washington Consensus", and it was the mindset of central bankers (including your own Bank of England) with their thinking about the sufficiency of inflation targeting and hostility to regulation. (Palley, 2009)

<sup>133</sup> This is not to suggest that economic elites are uniformly *aware* of alternatives. Jason Stanley argues: "[T]he flawed ideology that the elite use to justify their status leads to lack of knowledge. And this lack of knowledge prevents them from realizing their deepest goals. ... If elites generally acquire false ideologies, then members of highly privileged groups regularly act from motives that they would, upon rational reflection, reject. They do not recognize that they are acting from ill-conceived motives. Therefore, their actions are not autonomous, in the sense that the agents would not *reflectively endorse* their actual reasons for acting. (Stanley, 2015, 263, 266)

<sup>134</sup> Michael Hudson, *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Destroy the Global Economy* (Kansas City MO: ISLET-Verlag, 2015).

reward for maintaining this view is, of course, that one can sit back and relax, forget all the unpleasantness of the world, and enjoy one's dreams of the beatific vision and eternal felicity."<sup>135</sup> And, one should add, wealth.

Not only does mainstream economics have a track record of failure for the non-wealthy (and a record of success for the minority benefitting from financialization), but merely *studying* it has been shown to produce "debased" moral behavior and attitudes.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, the negative effects of earning a degree in economics are long lasting; one study found that U.S. Congresspeople with an economics degree were significantly more likely to engage in corrupt practices than their peers.<sup>137</sup> The tree of mainstream economics produces bitter fruit indeed.

Regardless, the most pernicious effect of mainstream economics may be in crowding-out alternative ideas. Take the issue of government debt, which the U.S. media in recent years has presented as if were the equivalent of household borrowing.<sup>138</sup> If a household borrows more than it can repay, bankruptcy awaits; this suggests that a similarly dire fate might await governments with too much debt ("look at Greece!").<sup>139</sup> Yet a government like that of the U.S., which produces its own sovereign currency (unlike

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<sup>135</sup> Hunt and Lautzenheiser, *History of Economic Thought*, 396.

<sup>136</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "The Moral Effects of Economic Teaching," *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>137</sup> René Ruske, "Does Economics Make Politicians Corrupt? Empirical Evidence from the United States Congress," *Kyklos* 68, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>138</sup> Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 83-86.

<sup>139</sup> If this analogy were in any way accurate, then the following statement of Tom Ferguson's in 1995 would have been proven wrong as the tech bubble and its downstream wealth effects eliminated the deficit in 1998. Instead of restarting growth, the prediction of Modern Monetary theorists came true (Wray, 2012, 28-29).

"Were the drop in government demand promptly offset by an expansion of demand from the private sector, there would be no problem. One could sit back and cheer on the invisible hand as it brushed aside America's economic problems. But unfortunately, as the post-Keynesians among us have warned from the start, the invisible hand is now, in fact, mostly waving goodbye to vast numbers of ordinary Americans. Despite all the noise about how cutting the deficit is the key to restarting economic growth, this is simply not true." (Friedman 1995, 324)



Greece), can never run out of the money it creates with a keyboard.<sup>140</sup> It does not even need to borrow, since like private banks but without even solvency or capital adequacy restrictions, the government creates money *ex nihilo*. If this can be done to the tune of trillions of dollars for financial bailouts<sup>141</sup> and the military<sup>142</sup> – why not to address social needs? As Michael Hudson observed about the Great Recession bailouts:

If there was a silver lining to all this, it has been to demonstrate that *if the Treasury and Federal Reserve can create \$13 trillion of public obligations – money – electronically on computer keyboards, there really is no Social Security problem at all, no Medicare shortfall, no inability of the American government to rebuild the nation's infrastructure. ...* Even more remarkable is the attempt to convince the population that new money and debt creation to bail out Wall Street – and vest a new century of financial billionaires at public subsidy – cannot be mobilized just as readily to save labor and industry in the “real” economy.<sup>143</sup>

This attempt to convince the population of an absurdity is all the worse in light of two considerations: the suffering and even death directly attributable to the crisis,<sup>144</sup> and the lack of any real constraints on solving the worst problems. Two political economists argue: It hardly requires John Maynard Keynes to see the obvious implication for government action. Especially when the government can borrow at almost zero rates of interest, it is

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<sup>140</sup> Thomas Ferguson and Robert Johnson, "A World Upside Down? Deficit Fantasies in the Great Recession," *International Journal of Political Economy* 40, no. 1 (2011): 12.

<sup>141</sup> Hudson, *Killing the Host*, 214.

<sup>142</sup> Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 285. “[F]or the military-industrial complex, itself, of course, ‘double-entry bookkeeping’ [has] acquired an entirely new meaning: figures representing the federal deficit [are] simultaneously entries in its profits column.”

<sup>143</sup> Michael Hudson, “Free Money Creation to Bail out Financial Speculators, but not Social Security or Medicare,” *Naked Capitalism* (June 17, 2011).

<sup>144</sup> Marina Karanikolos et al., "Financial Crisis, Austerity, and Health in Europe," *The Lancet* 381, no. 9874 (2013). A strong social safety net for the unemployed – which exists in Scandinavian countries – has been found to prevent unemployment-linked increases in morality (Norström and Grönqvist, 2015).

easy to have one's deficit cake and eat it too. The upside down world of the Great Recession needs to be put right side up. There is no excuse for failing to move vigorously to put America back to work, in the long run *lowering* the deficit and preserving the vital government programs that are now the only thing separating many ordinary Americans from a lifetime of poor education, untreated illness, and poverty.<sup>145</sup>

Instead, the media never tires of propagating scare stories about “entitlements” driving the U.S. into bankruptcy<sup>146</sup> – whatever that would mean for a sovereign issuer of fiat currency.<sup>147</sup> At least in the most accessed medium, television, there is no discussion of proposals for a universal basic income, a government job guarantee, or doing again what was done during World War II: re-tooling factories *en masse*, this time to produce a fully-renewable energy grid. *That* part of history does not repeat itself; instead:

[E]rstwhile Fed chairman Alan Greenspan, ECB governors, and many economists who kept insisting that bubbles in housing markets were impossible to perceive before 2008 and who still claim that policy is helpless against such developments now rue a bubble in government bond markets. Some also profess to foresee catastrophic inflation just ahead—never mind the blatant contradiction between what actual yield curves say about future rates of inflation and their faith that markets reflect available information. With the media hanging on these policymakers' every word, as though it were still 2005, the result is a public

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<sup>145</sup> Ferguson and Johnson, “A World Upside Down,” 38.

<sup>146</sup> Ferguson and Johnson, “A World Upside Down,” 33-35. “Almost as though they were medieval monks reciting sacred litanies, press commentators reeled off one staggering long-term deficit projection after another, talked breathlessly about financial ‘time bombs,’ and competed to proclaim reducing the deficit to be the most urgent public policy problem for the United States.”

<sup>147</sup> See, generally, L. Randall Wray, *Modern Money Theory: A Primer on Macroeconomics for Sovereign Monetary Systems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

discussion about deficit reduction uncomfortably reminiscent of the propaganda campaign that prepared the way for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. ... Conjectures, guesses, cherry-picked examples, and bold hypotheses are swirled together with striking, but perilously incomplete data to produce potted narratives that are simple, powerful, and—at first sight—compelling but that have not received nearly the critical scrutiny they should.<sup>148</sup>

Better ideas that deserve mere *awareness*, let alone critical scrutiny, are absent from the U.S. media – much like ideas about Iraq’s actual military capabilities and Iraqis’ opinions on an invasion were AWOL from the U.S. media in 2002-3.<sup>149</sup> If mere *facts* have no wings, then entire economic theories and policy proposals cannot either.

One such proposal a democratic electorate might be interested in is called the Chicago Plan. To understand it would first require an understanding that contrary to economics textbooks,<sup>150</sup> private banks do not intermediate between savers and borrowers, and banks are not constrained in their lending by the amount of loanable funds savers have deposited.<sup>151</sup> Instead, banks create money *ex nihilo*, constrained only by solvency and capital requirements – but most powerfully, *their own assessments* (prone to the bias of “animal spirits,” of course) of profitability and solvency. And when banks create money via loans, they also create deposits. As two IMF economists explained, “[t]he quantity of

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<sup>148</sup> Ferguson and Johnson, “A World Upside Down,” 10.

<sup>149</sup> The easiest reply to arguments about perspectives *missing* from the media is that the perspectives must not be very worthwhile – if they were, they would have garnered all the attention needed to make it into the mass media. Yet without wings, or media coverage, those perspectives would have had to be sought out. And as we know from philosophy of science and the Planck Principle, science does not necessarily work by superior theories converting the adherents of the old.

<sup>150</sup> E.g., Mankiw, *Economics*, 556-558, 684-686.

<sup>151</sup> Zoltan Jakab and Michael Kumhof, “Banks are Not Intermediaries of Loanable Funds – And Why This Matters.” Bank of England Working Paper No. 529 (May 29, 2015).

reserves is therefore a consequence, not a cause, of lending and money creation.”<sup>152</sup> This is not the way the monetary system is described in economics classes or the media. (Also, the mythical meme that money (and credit) first arose as an improvement upon bartering – which imbues money with a solidity it does not have and never did – persists in textbooks despite being repeatedly debunked.)<sup>153</sup> But the unavoidable conclusion is that “private banks are almost fully in control of the money creation process” – that is, “privately created deposit money ... plays the central role in the current U.S. monetary system, while government-issued money plays a quantitatively and conceptually negligible role.”<sup>154</sup> The Chicago Plan would reverse this, putting private banks into the role of saver-borrower intermediary they are already falsely believed to play, and government into the role of primary credit creator. First proposed in the wake of the Great Depression, the Chicago Plan won nearly universal support among economists, but was never implemented due to resistance from – where else? – private banks.<sup>155</sup> After detailing their analysis along with a simulation, the IMF economist-authors conclude that the benefits of the plan would exceed even those imagined when it was first proposed nearly a century ago:

The Chicago Plan could significantly reduce business cycle volatility caused by rapid changes in banks’ attitudes towards credit risk, it would eliminate bank runs, and it would lead to an instantaneous and large reduction in the levels of both government and private debt. It would accomplish the latter by making government-issued money, which represents equity in the commonwealth rather than debt, the central

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 3, 28.

<sup>153</sup> David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011): 40-41.

<sup>154</sup> Jaromír Beneš and Michael Kumhof, “The Chicago Plan Revisited,” IMF Working Paper No. 12/202 (August 2012): 10-11.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 19.

liquid asset of the economy, while banks concentrate on their strength, the extension of credit to investment projects that require monitoring and risk management expertise. ... One additional advantage is large steady state output gains due to the removal or reduction of multiple distortions, including interest rate risk spreads, distortionary taxes, and costly monitoring of macroeconomically unnecessary credit risks. Another advantage is the ability to drive steady state inflation to zero in an environment where liquidity traps do not exist, and where monetarism becomes feasible and desirable because the government does in fact control broad monetary aggregates. This ability to generate and live with zero steady state inflation is an important result, because it answers the somewhat confused claim of opponents of an exclusive government monopoly on money issuance, namely that such a monetary system would be highly inflationary. There is nothing in our theoretical framework to support this claim. And ... there is very little in the monetary history of ancient societies and Western nations to support it either.<sup>156</sup>

Regardless of whether this argument or the arguments put forth by banks to retain their exorbitant privilege of money creation would ultimately be found convincing by the electorate, the point is that the electorate cannot deliberate on an argument it has never been exposed to. That is, in an economy drowning in debt,<sup>157</sup> stagnant wages, and

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>157</sup> In his review of the history of debt, David Graeber reveals the way in which the ancient concept of social "obligation" was piggybacked upon by the modern capitalist concept of "debt." This very ancient concept with deep cultural and psychological roots, which is intertwined with our sense of morality and cooperation, has evolved into a fundamentally perverted, modern concept. He concludes:

As it turns out, we don't "all" have to pay our debts. Only some of us do [the non-wealthy]. Nothing would be more important than to wipe the slate clean for everyone, mark a break with our accustomed morality, and start again. ... What is a debt, anyway? A debt is just the

underemployment, and ruttled into secular stagnation and regular crises, the citizenry is denied the opportunity to even learn about, still less debate, a proposal intended to solve *these* problems, and others besides (government credit creation could be directed toward renewable energy and climate change mitigation). The information ecology or the marketplace of ideas is impoverished or distorted as a result. Again, the normatively indefensible selection pressure of power leaves its mark.

## vi. Empire

♪ *I'm from the murder capital, where we murder for capital* ♪

- Jay-Z, "Lucifer"

*"I must fairly say, I dread our own power and our own ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded. ... [With] all other Nations totally dependent upon our good pleasure, we may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing, and hitherto unheard-of power. But every other Nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin."*

- Edmund Burke, "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies" (1793)

*"We are beyond law, which is not unusual for an empire; unfortunately, we are also beyond common sense."*

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perversion of a promise. It is a promise corrupted by both math and violence. (Graeber, 2011, 391)

Speaking to the journalist Robert Fisk, Osama bin Laden explained in 1993 that he was not “declaring war against the West and Western people – but against the American regime which is against every American.”<sup>158</sup> Fisk interrupted him, explaining that unlike Arab regimes, Americans elect their own government, and believe that their government represents them. Fisk writes: “He disregarded my comment. I hope he did.” Some 3,000 non-regime-member American deaths later, perhaps bin Laden did not disregard the comment.

He should have. Voters in the U.S. certainly do elect their own government, but particularly in the area of foreign policy the government does not *represent* them in any but the most tortured sense of the word. For instance, the U.S. public considers strengthening the U.N., improving the global environment, and combating world hunger as more or equally important than defending the security of allied countries.<sup>159</sup> People in the U.S. “largely agree in identifying security and *justice* as the main goals of foreign policy and in favoring cooperative, multilateral means to attain them” (and a bare majority even supports allowing the U.N. to tax arm sales or oil to fund its operations).<sup>160</sup> Majorities would cut back or keep stable military spending and military aid, while super-majorities would expand funding to education and health care.<sup>161</sup> While roughly half of the population

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<sup>158</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005): 20.

<sup>159</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 41.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 139, 147, 156, emphasis added. See also Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S. Opinion on General Principles of World Order,” *Public Opinion on Global Issues* (December 16, 2011).

<sup>161</sup> Page and Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, 114-115.

wants to cut back economic aid to other countries, most of the population overestimates *current* levels of aid by a factor of 40 or more – even including much-vaunted private charity, the U.S. ranks dead last among developed countries in economic aid as a proportion of GDP.<sup>162</sup> In total:

Security from attack and security of domestic well-being come first, but most Americans also ascribe substantial importance to achieving *justice* for people abroad and want the United States to pursue altruistic, humanitarian aims internationally. Over the years, pluralities or majorities of the public have regularly said that, in particular, combating world hunger and strengthening the United Nations should be very important goals of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>163</sup>

The U.S. foreign policy elite think differently. Between 1974 and 2002, foreign policy decision makers took stands *opposed* by majorities of the public on one quarter of over 1,000 issues, and 70-80% of issues exhibited a 10% or greater difference of opinion between the foreign policy elite and the public.<sup>164</sup> Nor are these differences reduced over time, as elites enlighten the public with their wisdom. These persistent disparities “cast doubt upon whether U.S. foreign policy decision makers always abide by even the looser forms of democratic theory. They do not seem to have narrowed these wide gaps between themselves and the public, either by gradual responsiveness to public opinion or by correctly anticipating that public opinion would come into harmony with their views.”<sup>165</sup> Of course, “[i]f officials’ superior wisdom were the main source of gaps between their policy preferences and those of the general public, one would expect that the most highly

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 190-192.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 209, 212.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 219.



educated and best informed citizens would hold different policy preferences – preferences more like those of officials – than their fellow citizens do.”<sup>166</sup> Not so. Why?

Page and Bouton propose eight contributing factors for this gap, three of which concern information: scarce *inexpensive* information in the media, the high cost of information procured oneself, and information control by the executive branch.<sup>167</sup> (Yet when voters *do* manage to obtain information about their representatives’ stances on foreign policy, such information – accurate or not – affects their vote.)<sup>168</sup> One member of the foreign policy elite, Michael Mandelbaum, explains:

Whereas for the foreign-policy elite, the need for American leadership in the world is a matter of settled conviction, in the general public the commitment to global leadership is weaker.... That commitment depends on a view of its effects on the rest of the world and the likely consequences of its absence. These are views for which most Americans ... lack the relevant information...<sup>169</sup>

The devil is in the relevance. For Mandelbaum along with most of the foreign policy elite, the information considered “relevant” comprises an exculpatory framework of in-group-serving assumptions about U.S. global leadership’s “effects on the rest of the world and the likely consequences of its absence.” Other information one might consider relevant would come from first-hand experience of war, which Mandelbaum and most of his ilk lack; as

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 171-173.

<sup>168</sup> John H. Aldrich, et al., “Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates ‘Waltz Before a Blind Audience?’” *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 01 (1989). Inaccurate information can, of course, mislead:

The country elected George W. Bush, who promised that the United States would conduct a “humble” foreign policy that would respect the good opinion of mankind. ... Had he offered the electorate a platform incorporating the views of the leading figures of the neoconservative camp, who now make foreign policy for him, one may think that he would have lost in more states than Florida. (Pfaff, 2004, 123)

<sup>169</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, “The Inadequacy of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 81 no. 5 (2002): 67.

Erasmus wrote, and the battle-hardened Major General Smedley Butler would second, “sweet is war to those who know it not.”<sup>170</sup> Lacking the information the foreign policy elite consider “relevant,” the U.S. public instead desires a global order whose leadership is shared among the community of nations – not one whose leadership is dominated by its own government, and influenced primarily by business leaders,<sup>171</sup> with the goal of maximizing the wealth and power of the US elite.<sup>172</sup>

A peculiar combination of knowledge and ignorance – knowledge of international relations theories advocating the brutal pursuit of “national interest” as an unfortunate but necessary prophylactic against national destruction, and ignorance of what war feels like to those who kill and maim or die and get maimed – helps explain some of the difference in opinion between the public and the elite.<sup>173</sup> Another factor is economic interests, which have been demonstrated to affect elite foreign policy opinions along with ideology.<sup>174</sup>

Wealth affects ideology, and the ideology of the wealthy disproportionately influences foreign policy and *ideas* about foreign policy: military and covert operations, international economics, and environmental policy.<sup>175</sup> Even within the United States, it seems to be widely accepted that the wealthy have dominated foreign policy and used it as

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<sup>170</sup> Quoted in William Pfaff, *Fear, Anger and Failure: A Chronicle of the Bush Administration's War against Terror from the Attacks in September 2001 to Defeat in Baghdad* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004): 103.

Maj. Gen. Butler proposed:

One month before the Government can conscript the young men of the nation – it must conscript capital and industry and labor. Let the officers and the directors and the high-powered executives of our armament factories and our steel companies and our munitions makers and our shipbuilders and our airplane builders and the manufacturers of all the other things that provide profit in war time as well as the bankers and the speculators, be conscripted – to get \$30 a month, the same wage as the lads in the trenches get. (Butler, 2003, 39)

<sup>171</sup> Jacobs and Page, “Who Influences.”

<sup>172</sup> E.g., Laurence H. Shoup, *Wall Street's Think Tank: The Council on Foreign Relations and the Empire of Neoliberal Geopolitics, 1976-2014* (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

<sup>173</sup> Page and Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, 19-20, 202.

<sup>174</sup> Aguilar, Edwin, Benjamin O. Fordham, and G. Patrick Lynch. "The Foreign Policy Beliefs of Political Campaign Contributors: A Post-Cold War Analysis." *Social Science Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>175</sup> Stroup, *Wall Street's Think Tank*, 9-12, 65-88, 101, 127-129, 168-178, 303-306.

an instrument of self-aggrandizement, at least during the country's first century, and possibly up until the Second World War.<sup>176</sup> Yet while the U.S. school curriculum might not shy away from early crimes like the genocide of the Native Americans or slavery, it conveys the impression that WWII marked some sort of coming-to-Jesus moment for U.S. foreign policy – as if afterward, the government were selflessly committed to defending the free world from the evils of communist aggressors. Gore Vidal, himself a veteran of the war, provides a different view:

By the end of World War II, we were the most powerful and least damaged of the great nations. We also had most of the money. America's hegemony lasted exactly five years. Then the cold and hot wars began. Our masters would have us believe that all our problems are the fault of the Evil Empire of the East, with its Satanic and atheistic religion, ever ready to destroy us in the night. This nonsense began at a time when we had atomic weapons and the Russians did not. They had lost 20 million of their people in the war, and 8 million of them before the war, thanks to their neoconservative Mongolian political system. Most important, there was never any chance, then or now, of the money power (all that matters) shifting from New York to Moscow. What was – and is – the reason for the big scare? Well, World War II made prosperous the United States, which had been undergoing a depression for a dozen years; and made very rich those magnates and their managers who govern the Republic, with many a wink, in the people's name. In order to maintain a general prosperity (and enormous wealth for the few) they decided that we would become the world's policeman, perennial shield against the Mongol hordes. We shall have an

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<sup>176</sup> E.g., Smedley D. Butler, *War Is a Racket* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003): 23-37; Ferguson, *Golden Rule*, 64.

arms race, said one of the high priests, John Foster Dulles, and we shall win it because the Russians will go broke first. We were then put on a permanent wartime economy, which is why a third or so of the government's revenues is constantly being siphoned off to pay for what is euphemistically called defense.<sup>177</sup>

This view, and the information comprising it, is vanishingly rare within the United States. As the historian John Coatsworth observes, during the Cold War the U.S. government directly or indirectly overthrew at least 24 governments in Latin America alone, replacing them with regimes that during the (post-Stalin) period of 1960-1990 produced vastly more political prisoners, political executions, and torture victims than the USSR and its East European satellites.<sup>178</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, this sort of information would be expected to be absent among those strongly identifying with the US national ingroup, whether through avoidance of the types of sources likely to contain it (easy to do given supply-side biases), or through motivated reasoning once exposed to it. Members of the foreign policy elite, on the other hand, can incorporate such knowledge into a wider, exculpatory framework around strategic goals, of the sort Perry Anderson describes as the dominant Cold War policy:

Monarchs, police chiefs, generals, sheikhs, gangsters, latifundists: all were better than communists. Democracy was certainly the ideal political system. Where it was firmly established, in the advanced industrial countries, markets were deepest and business was safest. But where it was not, in less developed societies, matters were

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<sup>177</sup> Vidal, *Gore Vidal's State*, 66.

<sup>178</sup> John H. Coatsworth, "The Cold War in Central America, 1975-1991," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War Vol. 3*, ed. Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, 201-221. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 221. "[T]he Soviet bloc as a whole was less repressive, measured in terms of human victims, than many individual Latin American countries."

otherwise. There, if elections were not proof against attempts on private property, they were dispensable. The Free World was compatible with dictatorship: the freedom that defined it was not the liberty of citizens, but of capital – the one common denominator of its rich and poor, independent and colonial, temperate and tropical regions alike.<sup>179</sup>

The influence of economic interest on the formation of this policy is obvious enough, but ideology is important as well. International relations “realism” in particular would seem to provide an ideal ideological framework: what atrocity cannot be justified by recourse to the anarchic nature of the world system and each state’s vital need to maximize power or flirt with extinction? International relations liberalism, while perhaps less obviously ideal for such a task, certainly provides a framework of its own to justify violent military intervention.<sup>180</sup> The practical difference between realists and liberals is suggested by an anecdote from General Curtis LeMay at the start of the Korean War:

We slipped a note kind of under the door into the Pentagon and said, “Look, let us go up there ... and burn down five of the biggest towns in North Korea – and they're not very big – and that ought to stop it.” Well, the answer to that was four or five screams – “You'll kill a lot of non-combatants, and it’s too horrible.” Yet over a period of three years or so ... we burned down *every [sic]* town in North Korea and South Korea, too.... Now, over a period of three years this is palatable, but to kill a few people to stop this from happening – a lot of people can't stomach it.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Anderson, *American Foreign Policy*, 72.

<sup>180</sup> Michael C. Desch, “America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>181</sup> Cited in Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1997): 298.

The stereotypically “realist” perspective would align with LeMay (secure the “national interest” using the most effective means), and the stereotypically liberal perspective would align with the Pentagon’s reaction (refuse means that offend moral sensibilities and international law) – but the real-world result remained the same. As Anderson puts it: “Liberal internationalism is the obligatory idiom of American imperial power. Realism, in risking a closer correspondence to its practice, remains facultative and subordinate.”<sup>182</sup> Of course, realists as well as liberals can also take anti-war stands<sup>183</sup> – both IR theories offer an overarching framework within which foreign policies of all shades of morality (and standards by which to judge morality) can be comfortably incorporated.

Recent history has witnessed the emergence of a new form of imperial power mostly eschewing invasions, permanent occupations, and the assumption of responsibility for the conquered territory.<sup>184</sup> While the United States’ empire has military bases the world over, they are not directly involved in administering local affairs. Instead, the U.S. empire uses limited military force, covert action, ideological influence, and tools of economic and political power to extract the same benefits that past empires had to secure by military conquest and territorial expansion.<sup>185</sup> Yet the U.S. electorate never *chose* this; its

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<sup>182</sup> Anderson, *American Foreign Policy*, 195.

<sup>183</sup> E.g., Colin Elman and Michael Jensen, eds., *The Realism Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Page and Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, 6-7. The arch-leftist Noam Chomsky adopts a characteristically Realist perspective in his political analyses (Osborn, 2009), and the arch-Realist Edward Carr adopted a characteristically Marxist perspective in his critique of the “harmony of interests” (Colin and Jensen, 2014, 42-44).

<sup>184</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, xvii-xix.

<sup>185</sup> *Inter alia*: William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and C.I.A. Interventions since World War II* (Monroe ME: Common Courage Press, 2004); William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower* (Monroe ME: Common Courage Press, 2000); Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl, 2004); Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006); Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Henry Holt, 2004); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Macmillan, 2007); Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance* (London: Pluto Press, 2003); Michael Hudson, *Global*

representatives chose this path, while the represented remained ignorant. Certainly, had the citizenry been presented with this perspective along with criticisms<sup>186</sup> of it and alternate perspectives, the majority may well have chosen to go the imperial route. Without mere awareness, however, the U.S. public never exercised a choice. They have been roped into the core of a global empire they nominally control, and of which they are radically ignorant. A democratic media system living up to the name would at the very least provide information sufficient to exercise a choice of how citizens' government will interact with the world.

#### **vii. What this perspective reveals about contemporary politics**

In her criticism of memetics, the philosopher Maria Kronfeldner argues that to be more than heuristically trivial, a theory must go beyond merely re-describing what is already known, and reveal something invisible to other descriptions and explanations. She focuses her critical gaze on the gene-meme analogy, and does thorough work explaining how very different genes are from memes. However, theories of cultural evolution do not rely on analogy; they propose an identity. That is, underlying both genetic and cultural (or

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*Fracture: The New International Economic Order* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Matt Kennard, *The Racket: A Rogue Reporter vs. the Masters of the Universe* (London: Zed Books, 2015); John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man: The Shocking Story of How America Really Took Over the World* (New York: Random House, 2011); Yash Tandon, *Trade is War: The West's War against the World* (New York: OR Books, 2015); Wikileaks, *The WikiLeaks Files: The World According to US Empire* (London: Verso Books, 2015).

<sup>186</sup> After a considerable search, I was able to find only two comprehensive critical treatments of Noam Chomsky's political writings (as an exemplar of the work cited above). The first, *The Anti-Chomsky Reader*, is thoroughly underwhelming, providing some solid criticism of his early work on Cambodia, but fatally weak arguments elsewhere (Collier and Horowitz, 2005). The second, *Chomsky's Challenge to American Power*, is better-researched, but it comes to the conclusion that Chomsky's political arguments are predominantly sound, with minor reservations (Greco, 207-229). Chomsky's political critics have evidently failed to make even a *prima facie* case against his expansive, detailed political work. This in itself bolsters Chomsky's case, as his popularity and visibility have attracted quite an array of ideological opponents; one would presume, if their critiques were tenable, that they could produce a comprehensive debunking (Sayeed, 2016).

memetic) evolution is a common identity, information, in two fundamentally different instantiations: biological and cultural. Analogy may have given birth to the concept of “meme” or its many precursors (alternately, analogy with cultural evolution, in particular attempts to find a common ancestor of modern languages, may have been an unacknowledged midwife to the concept of biological evolution), and analogy is still used to explain the as-yet less widely known concept of cultural evolution. Nonetheless, the core evolutionary process is the same, and information whether biological or cultural is an identity both forms of evolution have in common. Yet even if Kronfeldner’s critique largely misses this point, her concern about triviality deserves attention: particularly, what does a cultural evolutionary or memetic perspective reveal about politics that is invisible to other explanations?

Most fundamentally, it is a materialist idealism. Ideas have immense power, and informational power dominates power in its other forms; yet ideas are material, physical, like all the rest of what we have warrant to believe exists. In Marxist terms, the base and superstructure influence each other: existing political-economic structures and institutions exert a powerful selection pressure on the ideas prevalent in a society, and the ideas prevalent in a society can reshape and reform existing political-economic structures and institutions. In Schopenhauerian terms, the world comprises Will and Idea – but both are material, with Will being the aggregate of individual and universal psychological attributes, features, and biases, and Idea representing the memes, social representations, and ideologies circulating throughout society.

First, this perspective provides a more detailed explanation of how *Homo sapiens*, alone among millions of species, came to develop such a staggering wealth of ideas (and



artifacts derived from ideas): styles of music, religions, technologies, economic theories and political philosophies, etc. This is already an improvement upon other explanations, which lean toward the trivial: we are simply more intelligent, and our intelligence, like the spiritual soul, allows us to create ideas *ex nihilo*. (If that were the case, why could rock 'n' roll not have come before the blues, or something like one of Beethoven's symphonies been composed during the baroque period, *ex nihilo*?) The cultural evolutionary perspective more parsimoniously explains the path dependence we see in history of all ideas, from music to technology. Furthermore, it alone explains why even the greatest geniuses do not create brilliant ideas truly *sui generis*, without traces of inspiration from previous ideas or without standing on the shoulders of giants; why it seems that there is nothing new under the sun.

In addition, the cultural evolutionary perspective is perfectly consonant with both biological evolution (which explains the staggering variety of lifeforms on our planet) and the physicality of information: both information as the nonrandom structure of physical matter, and information as a reduction in uncertainty (occasioned by particular nonrandom structures of physical matter, like a love letter that reduces uncertainty about another's feelings, or the network of neurons in one's brain that reduces uncertainty about whether deficit spending inevitably results in inflation). The "we are simply very intelligent" perspective, replacing the belief in a spiritual soul, has had to assimilate this fact, as various religious perspectives have had to assimilate the theory of biological evolution.

Cultural evolution is not a theory unto itself, but merely a subset of evolutionary theory. With the insight that information evolves in both biological and cultural realms

established, no further progress can be made without investigating the environment or ecology in which ideas evolve. That ecology includes the human brain itself, the ideas in all other human brains, ideas stored in cultural artifacts and institutions, and the physical environment; all of which influence each other in an open, complex system. Hence to make anything other than trivial observations about politics – that the realm of politics is governed by ideas, which evolve under the influence of the human brain and the social and physical worlds – the whole ecology of information must be sketched out.

This begins with an understanding of the human brain and its history. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the contemporary understanding of the brain's evolution is that predispositions toward *modern* political ideologies are somehow related to our varying, *ancient* genetic endowments. A great deal of progress remains to be made, but for now there is convincing evidence that predispositions toward equality and change or hierarchy and stasis are heritable – certainly through socialization, but also through as-yet poorly understood genetic mechanisms. This first imprint on the ecology of information suggests a pedigree stretching back hundreds of thousands of years: an ancestor common to both chimpanzees and humans with a steeply hierarchal social structure (as is common throughout the animal kingdom). It is not the soul that sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other animals, nor just our ability to *know* things; it is our *social* intelligence, our “egalitarian syndrome”-fueled ability to cooperate that turned us into one of the few eusocial species on the planet – and certainly the most dominant. These contradictory aspects of our evolutionary history, the hierarchical and the egalitarian, may be the source of our “Left” and “Right” psychological predispositions. What this tells us about politics today is that the ecology of information we inhabit is not ruled by reason alone, but also by these

psychological predispositions that incline us toward accepting some ideas over others. Any state project of creating a new Man, whether *Homo economicus* or *Homo Sovieticus*, must acknowledge that there are no blank slates. And, *we* must acknowledge that we do not operate in a realm of pure reason; from birth, our reason is imperceptibly tilted Left or Right.

Moreover, the deep history of contemporary political cleavages suggests a rapprochement between Right and Left: both are essential for a functioning evolutionary system. There must be a conservative element to retain functioning innovations from the past, just as there must be pressure for novelty and change to ensure that social systems continually adapt to a fluctuating environment. Stasis means death through sclerosis, and constant, reckless change means death by cancerous mutation. The Left or Right of any given society at any given time and on any given issue may be more correct than the other; one side's policy preferences, if put into effect, might result in the achievement of shared (or unique) goals better than the other; but as adherents of one side or another, we are poorly suited to provide dispassionate judgment – and even if we were, it would be a most unlikely result that ideas coming from either Left or Right have consistently, always, been correct. Debate, and even political strife, are unavoidable and necessary.

Next, the way our brains process information is far from any ideal of rationality. Our reason is not only limited and bounded, it is distorted. We are powerfully inclined to hold on to those memes that happen to have reproduced in our brains (or were formed from combining parts of other memes, or created *de novo* through sense impressions), even in the face of disconfirming evidence – that is, when our constant attempts to shield ourselves from uncongenial information fail, and we are actually exposed to disconfirming evidence.

This evolutionary “design” may work well for reasoning in the small groups we first inhabited as a species, but in the mass society of the U.S., with its means of communication as currently constituted, it has produced a pathological level of polarization. And not only do we bury our heads in the sand, so to speak, when our beliefs may face some challenge; when our repose is threatened by the thought that we do not in fact inhabit the best of all possible political worlds, we actively try to justify the unjustifiable. Little wonder then that so many climate scientists are labeled “alarmists” – they study an existential threat facing a species that could not be more poorly suited, psychologically (not to mention *politically*), to address it.

We are inclined to favor arbitrarily defined groups of which we are members. Nations, human “races”, and political parties get their psychological staying power from the same quirk that glues together fans of sports teams, pop singers, and cults: an adaptation that helped hunter-gatherer tribes cohere. From an evolutionary perspective, this is a vestigial anachronism, and frankly, an embarrassment. As Schopenhauer put it: “The cheapest sort of pride is national pride ... every miserable fool who has nothing at all of which he can be proud adopts, as a last resource, pride in the nation to which he belongs; he is ready and glad to defend all its faults and follies tooth and nail, thus reimbursing himself for his own inferiority.”<sup>187</sup> Political scientists, whose remit an outsider might presume includes thinking about, experimenting with, and designing alternate systems of

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<sup>187</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life and Other Essays*, trans. Bailey Saunders and Ernest Belfort Bax (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901): 52.

political organization, seem instead content with merely describing existing systems (when not playing Dr. Pangloss by justifying them).<sup>188</sup>

This evolutionary perspective is perfectly comfortable with the results of media effects research, quite unlike the desperate resistance this research provokes from perspectives anchored in Enlightenment notions of reason. Information is physical; to be informed about the distant realm of national or international politics, physical bits of information need to be transported from their points of origin into the brains of billions dispersed throughout the planet. As such, total political ignorance is our default state, and can only be changed through a system of logistics that arranges the delivery of information.<sup>189</sup> Schools are one such system for basic political information, and the news media is the other, providing continual updates; social networks, whether in real life or online, provide secondary logistics, redelivering political information from the news media (sometimes modified, reinterpreted) to many who are unconnected to its logistical network. As such, it is no surprise that the news media has powerful effects: political information does not spring immaculately from the depths of our souls, it must be delivered to our brains.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> At least Shiping Tang considers the idea of greater global political unification; but his dismissal of its mere possibility on evolutionary grounds (with a touch of Foucauldian mysticism) is eminently contestable. (Tang, 2013, 141-146)

<sup>189</sup> Even after our default state has been changed somewhat by receiving political information, we remain overwhelmingly ignorant. Arthur Lupia concludes: "*When it comes to political information, there are two groups of people. One group understands that they are almost completely ignorant of almost every detail of almost every law and policy under which they live. The other group is delusional about how much they know. There is no third group.*" (Lupia, 2016, 3)

<sup>190</sup> Again, this information, *ideas*, are powerful and cannot be ignored. Mark Blyth makes the case that practicing social science without viewing ideas as *fundamental* to both the nature of human action and causation in social systems produces seriously misleading explanations. ... Despite more than one hundred years of effort in this regard, political science, for example, has uncovered no overarching laws, has deduced and abandoned several dozens of theories, and is still consistently surprised by events despite all these efforts. (Blyth, 2001, 83-84)

The most powerful effect the news media has is the most difficult to notice: the power of omission. By omitting certain political perspectives and the bits of information that comprise them, the news media makes them vanishingly unlikely to spread in society. Witness U.S. public opinion in the run-up to the second Iraq War: with the U.S. mass media largely omitting anti-war perspectives and the bits of information comprising them, majority support for the war was virtually guaranteed, even among the well-educated and politically informed, unlike in countries whose media systems disseminated a great deal of anti-war information. (See also the Vietnam War; John Zaller's investigation of media effects revealed the same dynamic.) However, the U.S. is not a closed system, and information largely un-disseminated by the mass media can still enter in drips and drabs through foreign media, word of mouth, and internet sources.

This conceptualization says little in itself about how well or poorly the U.S. news media is playing its role in informing citizens to carry out their duties in a democracy; it is merely more precise, less mushy, than accounts that do not grapple with the physicality of information. But it does alert us to just how powerful omission is. Certainly, we *could* create the physical, neuronal structures in our brains encoding bits of information like "Saddam Hussein's ideology makes it exceedingly unlikely that he is working with Islamic fundamentalists" or "if free and fair elections had been held in Vietnam in 1956, the people would most likely have chosen the Workers' Party" – but without having been received through a news media outlet, these would be in the same class as an infinite number of random thoughts like "the earth's core contains trillions of tennis balls" and "bacon is made from beetles." That is, while we are capable of creating just about any idea – instantiated in physical, neuronal structures – without some indicia of reliability, such ideas are

information only in the nonrandom-structure-of-physical-matter sense, not the uncertainty-reduction sense. To reduce uncertainty, political information needs greater validation than merely having been thought up on a whim; it would need the validation the news media is best suited to provide. Nor is it guaranteed or even likely that such information about Hussein or Vietnam would be connected to other relevant information needed to form or shift an opinion, without this connection being provided by a perspective or frame disseminated through the media (e.g., Hussein's antipathy to Islamic fundamentalists needed a connection to the level of threat he was supposed to pose to the U.S., and the opinions of the Vietnamese people needed a connection to the foundational United Statesian values of self-determination and a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind").

Hence we must look at a country's media system to see whether it features political-economic pressures tending to favor some perspectives and some information while omitting others. This is precisely what we see in the United States' media system: political-economic pressures favoring the ideas and ideological perspectives of the Republican and Democratic Parties. Or more precisely, their "central" tendencies: the leftward tail of the Democratic Party gets minimal access to the means of mass communication to disseminate its views on fundamentally reforming the economic system or rolling back the U.S. empire, just as the rightward tail of the Republican Party gets little access to disseminate its views on homosexuality or the equivalent-to-murder evil of abortion. Libertarianism enjoys some limited access (luckily for them, their views on social issues are similar to the mainstream of the Democratic Party, and their views on economics are similar to the mainstream of the Republican Party), but socialism, anarchism, paleoconservatism and more are simply

omitted. Naturally, this results in very few citizens having any substantial amount of information about political ideologies outside of a very limited spectrum (what would be considered Center Right to Far Right in most of Europe, though there far-right foreign policy ideologues would have many fewer toy soldiers and weapons to play with). U.S. citizens *could* amass as much information about other political ideologies as they wanted – it is a free society – in exactly the same way that they could amass information about quantum physics, nanochemistry, geobiology, Peruvian folklore or Belorussian basketweaving: through independent research, spending time and money finding and amassing it. By far the cheapest source of information, the mass media, will be of no help.

Therefore, this perspective explains the lament heard among leftists and rightists outside of the mainstream: “why won’t the people *wake up!*?” – presumably, to cast off sleep and adopt the lamenter’s political ideology. But an ideology omitted from the cheapest and most easily accessible sources of political information does not materialize in brains overnight, not even if books by Marx and Chomsky or von Hayek and Kissinger are placed under one’s pillow. Ideology comprises a great deal of information which must be absorbed somehow, as it was for the lamenters: through reading books and low-circulation magazines, listening to marginal radio stations, or attending lectures with a few dozen other souls. Even if a leftwing or rightwing lamenter were to somehow convince millions of people to begin absorbing the information comprising their ideology, they would be fighting an uphill psychological battle, with confirmation bias, frequency-based and prestige biases, system justification tendency and the rest putting up opposition to ideas about fundamentally reforming the existing political-economic system.



This perspective, then, takes “democracy” in the United States to be different only in degree, not kind, from “democracy” in Iran or China. If voting for representatives in government is the core of “democracy”, then all three countries fit the bill. This should cause cognitive dissonance among Unitedstatesians, and to reduce it they might add a further requirement, that there be no barriers to entry for the candidates competing to represent the voters. But this strategy requires another step: that there be no *de jure* barriers to entry (e.g., approval from the party-state), while *de facto* barriers – like the empirically-observed requirement of large sums of money – are allowed. Then, the U.S. enjoys some distance from Iran and China, but it is separated by formality, not substance; an anti-capitalist with no money in the U.S. has a negligible chance of winning a major election, while an atheist in Iran or an anti-communist in China cannot even run. Still, this looks much like a difference in degree instead of kind. So too when “democracy” is defined in accord with its Greek origins as “people power,” implying that all people share an equal degree of political power. If there were a Gini coefficient for political power, 0 representing democracy, and 1 representing absolute dictatorship, certainly the U.S. would be lower than Iran or China; yet still too far from 0 to be accurately defined as a “democracy” according to its original meaning. The brothers Koch and Sheldon Adelson enjoy inordinately more political power than millions of poor citizens, and this is not seriously contestable.

But why not? The common objection to any contention that the U.S. political system is “controlled” by some faction or another (rather than by *the* people as a whole) is that every citizen has only one vote, no matter whether they are rich or poor, White or Black, native or naturalized. If the people wanted a change in government, all they would have to

do is vote that change into being. (This is typically followed by a leap of logic: that the people do not vote the change into being means that they do not want the change – ignoring the possibility that the people *would* want the change, if only they were aware of it.) This objection may seem to debunk the contention, but in fact the two are perfectly compatible. The U.S. political system is controlled proximately by those who vote, but it is controlled ultimately by those who shape and influence voters' perceptions, those with disproportionate power over who can run, for whom the voters will vote, and how the voting public will form opinions of the winner once in office. From the perspective of an evolutionary, materialist idealism, this is an inescapable conclusion; to run for office requires money to gain access to the means of mass communication – the logistical system for political information – and to win office and retain public approval requires favorable information to be disseminated through it. This is the source of the ultimate control over the U.S. political system enjoyed by a few: either direct control over media outlets, or the financial power to gain access to media outlets owned by others. It is some comfort that those with this ultimate control are unlikely to be unified, and even if their views share much in common, are unlikely to act in conscious unity; but this is a comfort against totalitarianism, not oligarchy. (And a thin comfort at that, in light of revelations about U.S. government spying capabilities which offer “turnkey totalitarianism.”)

Turning to recent U.S. political developments, here there is less for an evolutionary, materialist idealism to shine light on, at least with any great confidence. Being written by a human author means that this subject is even more constrained (than in writing about scientific research and theory) by the boundaries of the set of memes that happened to make their way into the author's head. While we all hope that such boundaries were set by

a wise judge who separated true from false and good from evil, the evidence forces us to admit instead that they were set by a fallible human brain subject to a laundry list of politically-relevant psychological biases, and delimited by an arbitrary, contingent, and small collection of influences, omitting the overwhelmingly vast sea of possible sources. Nonetheless, as Pascal noted in the context of effective rhetoric, when in disagreement one should “notice from what side [the other] views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false.... and that he only failed to see all sides.”<sup>191</sup> In politics, the situation most likely to exist is that most if not all memes or bits of information have some connection to reality; and the political worldviews and ideologies they constitute are a largely accurate view of one side of a whole too complex for our brains to represent other than through overbroad generalizations – spooks. (Though one hopes, along with some evolutionary epistemologists, that widespread representations of this reality may improve in accuracy over time, as do animals’ capacities to accurately understand important aspects of their environments.)<sup>192</sup> As such, the following discussion of recent political developments in the U.S. applies a materialist idealist perspective along with the author’s own view of one side of a complex whole. Other views of the same side of the whole may be fuller or more accurate, and views of other sides may point out important aspects of the whole occluded from the view of the first side.

Starting with the United States’ first reality TV show president, it stands to reason from the perspective in this book that someone with so much TV exposure would stand a

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<sup>191</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.

<sup>192</sup> See, e.g., Gerard Radnitzky and W.W. Bartley, III, eds., *Evolutionary Epistemology, Theory of Rationality, and the Sociology of Knowledge* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987).

good chance of being elected by a largely politically-ignorant electorate. (Particularly when profit-seeking television networks discovered that covering him attracted a great many eyeballs to sell to advertisers.) His widely-disseminated persona as a successful businessman resonated in a society taught in schools and by the news media to believe that free market capitalism is the best possible system of economic organization, if not one prescribed by God himself. And while many who immersed themselves in economic memes from reputable media outlets pointed out that by several objective measurements (like the most commonly used unemployment rate, GDP, and the federal deficit) the economy had recovered from the Great Financial Crisis, other objective measurements (median real wages, wealth and income concentration, inter-generational mobility, labor force participation, and household debt) indicated a great deal of economic suffering and anxiety among broad swaths of the electorate – fertile soil for a “change” candidate, even (or especially) one who breaks all rules of political decorum and strays outside of the ideological center; but an unfriendly environment for an establishment candidate.<sup>193</sup>

Trump either devised or stumbled upon an effective strategy: repeat memes from rightwing media outlets (not just Fox, but more-rightwing, fringe outlets as well), even if the memes are considered false and the outlets are deemed disreputable by the ideological mainstream. This made him seem forthright and fearless to audiences of the same outlets, a rare truth-teller among a sea of lying politicians. So too with statements that crossed

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<sup>193</sup> Yet Trump also appealed to slightly more wealthy voters than Clinton, giving H. L. Mencken’s century-old observation continued staying power:

Thus the plutocracy ... lacks all the essential characters of a true aristocracy: a clean tradition, culture, public spirit, honesty, honor, courage - above all, courage. It stands under no bond of obligation to the state; it has no public duty; it is transient and lacks a goal. Its most puissant dignitaries of today came out of the mob only yesterday - and from the mob they bring all its peculiar ignobilities. As practically encountered, the plutocracy stands quite as far from the *honnête homme* as it stands from the holy saints. Its main character is its incurable timorousness; it is for ever grasping at the straws held out by demagogues. (Mencken, 1982, 158)

taboos against speech considered racist and sexist by the political elite – not only would these resonate with voters harboring racist and sexist ideas (memes about ethnic out-groups being genetically or culturally inferior, and that women are best suited for subordinate social roles), but also among those with ideas explaining their own economic woes as the fault of immigrants and “mooching” minorities (due to ignorance of accurate, more complex explanations, and facilitated by in-group bias). In-group bias under one of its many guises, partisanship, did the rest, with Republicans overwhelmingly voting for the Republican; the hypothetical median voter was not a factor.

Of course, the ultimate source of these ideas is the rightwing media, which has grown prodigiously, cancerously since the late 1980s.<sup>194</sup> As this book’s perspective would predict, in contradistinction to the view that media outlets merely adapt to citizens’ (somehow) endogenously-formed opinions, first came the rise in rightwing media – only then came increased polarization in Congress and among the electorate.<sup>195</sup> This second wave of rightwing media, less intellectual and more entertainment-oriented than the first wave that began in the ‘40s and ‘50s, did not simply send ideas into the ether – it transported physical bits of information into tens of millions of brains. The recipients of such information were free to disregard it, or reinterpret it in myriad ways, but the stark increase in political polarization (particularly on the Right) strongly suggests that very many chose to accept ideas from the newly-opened rightwing floodgate, and shaped their

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<sup>194</sup> John Halpin, James Heidbreder, Mark Lloyd, Paul Woodhull, Ben Scott, Josh Silver, and S. Derek Turner, “The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio,” Joint Report by The Center for American Progress and Free Press (June 22, 2007); Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 252-276.

<sup>195</sup> James Moody and Peter J. Mucha, “Portrait of Political Party Polarization,” *Network Science* 1, no. 01 (2013); Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life” (June 12, 2014).

political worldviews out of it. This is not to suggest that the U.S. public as a whole has become more ideologically polarized; “facts don’t have wings” unless provided them by news media outlets, and those wings only bring information to people who expose themselves to such outlets. The United States remains a country of the politically innocent; only the roughly 20% of the population with a basic understanding of the political philosophies of liberalism and conservatism has likely been affected.<sup>196</sup>

Yet Trump, as the logical (if large) extension of a trend, was not the most interesting phenomenon in this election.<sup>197</sup> Most interesting, perhaps, was that electoral propaganda and legacy media outlets were shown to have lost a great deal of their influence (at least influence from the analysis the media provides, if not influence from the airtime granted to eyeball-grabbing candidates). Had they kept the influence they enjoyed just a decade or two ago, Clinton would have defeated Trump (had Jeb Bush, the winner of the early dollar vote, not already beaten him for the Republican nomination) on the strength of her support from most newspapers and TV channels, and her significant advantage in ad spending. As

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<sup>196</sup> In their recent review of the evidence of ideological thinking in the U.S., Kinder and Kalmoe conclude that:

[...] Converse’s conclusion stands. Most Americans are indifferent to or mystified by liberalism and conservatism as political ideas. Left to their own devices, only two or three in a hundred evaluate political parties and presidential candidates from an ideological point of view. More, perhaps sixteen in a hundred, appear to understand ideological terms when put before them. Everyone else— a huge majority of the public— is unable to participate in ideological discussion. (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, 41)

As for the much-venerated moderates, thought by many political pundits to be the key to electoral victory, so much so that political candidates’ proposed policies must be centrist or guarantee defeat at their hands, “the ‘moderate’ category seems less an ideological destination than a refuge for the innocent and confused.” (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, 71)

<sup>197</sup> Writing on July 26, 1920 in *The Baltimore Sun*, H. L. Mencken penned a few lines that were often quoted with regard to the second Bush, and seem only to be growing in prescience:

[A]ll the odds are on the man who is, intrinsically, the most devious and mediocre — the man who can most easily (and) adeptly disperse the notion that his mind is a virtual vacuum. The presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men. As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

many to the Left and Right of the political center have long hoped, the dominance of legacy mass media outlets over public opinion was seemingly eclipsed – pleasing the Left, by more participatory forms of media (social media, blogs, etc.), and pleasing the Right, by more conservative, partisan, but still commercial media outlets (Fox, talk radio, the websites of the newly-christened “alt-Right”, etc. – all of which could extend their reach through social media).

The other contender for most interesting development was the overperformance of the campaign of Bernie Sanders (as of this writing in May 2017, the most popular politician in the United States). One need not go back as far as the days of the Red Scare to find disbelief that a self-described democratic socialist could nearly win a major party’s nomination; early 2016 would do. His eventual loss is easily explainable: most regular voters in Democratic Party primaries are among the (relatively) politically knowledgeable, whose main lifeline to the realm of politics is the agenda-setting media, which favored the establishment frontrunner. The anomaly was his unexpected success. Like Trump, he was doubtless helped by an economy failing broad swaths of the population and a message closely calibrated to this reality, but he also seemed uniquely helped by the internet. Not only did he dominate on several social media platforms, but he won a higher share of the vote in states with a higher proportion of netizens and in counties with greater broadband internet availability.<sup>198</sup> Since the internet provides a significantly different ecology of information than television and newspapers,<sup>199</sup> it should produce different effects on the formation of political opinions (like increasing political knowledge, exposure to

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<sup>198</sup> Beattie, “Where Did.”

<sup>199</sup> The Pew Research Center, “New Media, Old Media: How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from the Traditional Press” (May 23, 2010).

heterogeneous partisan media, and affective polarization).<sup>200</sup> The vast breadth of the internet provides a far greater variety of facts (and lies), arguments (both sound and specious), perspectives (worthwhile and worthless), and interpretations (considered and kooky) than any television station or newspaper could *hope* to offer. Those who turn to the internet for political information have a greater chance of being exposed to ideas one may never find in the legacy media, including ideas like democratic socialism the legacy media in the U.S. has long considered verboten. The 2016 U.S. election (further) demonstrated that the internet has vastly changed the ecology of political information; if recent experience can justify any prediction of the future, it would be to expect the unexpected.

In Europe, the same prediction is sensible. While proponents of the European Union expected it to reduce the likelihood of the violent conflict that has soaked European history in blood, ironically some particular features of the E.U.'s design seem to be recreating the conditions that led to Europe's last orgy of bloodletting. In the 1930s, applied liberal economic ideology had created severe economic pain for majorities of Europeans, leading many to support fascist governments that rejected economic liberalism and used the state to intervene heavily in the economy to employ the unemployed and produce public goods. Today's eurozone was designed according to similar liberal economic principles – namely the belief that capitalist economies produce a felicitous equilibrium if left without much government interference – and has reproduced similar economic pain for majorities of Europeans. In this fertile soil, nationalist, xenophobic ideas are spreading, threatening the

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<sup>200</sup> Choi and Lee, "Investigating"; Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood, and Shanto Iyengar, "The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Affect," *American Journal of Political Science* 61 (2015); Lu Wei and Douglas Blanks Hindman, "Does the Digital Divide Matter More? Comparing the Effects of New Media and Old Media Use on the Education-Based Knowledge Gap," *Mass Communication and Society* 14, no. 2 (2011).



breakup of the E.U. if not renewed violence between nations. (Xenophobic ideas have at least two advantages over economic ideas as an explanation for economic pain: they are simpler, and take advantage of in-group bias.) If history is any guide, to avoid the rise of the nationalist Right will require abandoning liberal economics for a much more active state role (precisely what climate scientists argue is necessary in any case to transition from the current cyanide pill of an economy to an indefinitely-sustainable one). The problem then and now is that liberal economics is particularly attractive to those with wealth, who enjoy disproportionate power over systems of government, media, and education. Liberal economics, thought by many at the time to have been delivered a fatal blow by the worldwide Great Depression and the government-spending fueled recovery,<sup>201</sup> has come back to paradigmatic dominance in the academy – helped in no small part by funding from those with enough wealth to find it palatable – and from there, to the minds of public officials and the highly educated.<sup>202</sup> Here again, the internet and the way it has reshaped the ecology of information may prove helpful for alternative economic ideas that threaten the relative wealth of a few and promise a reduction in pain for the many. Until they spread more widely, the (near) future for the nationalistic, xenophobic European Right is bright. In the book that coined the word “meme,” Richard Dawkins suggested that the evolution of biological information was the story of self-replicating molecules developing ever larger bodies to house themselves in; today, genes pilot enormous organisms, like the human pilots of gigantic robots in Japanese *manga*. Extending that metaphor to the present subject, contemporary politics consists of memes, or bundles of memes comprising

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<sup>201</sup> Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Carroll Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope: A History of the World in Our Time* (New York: MacMillan, 1966): 497-555.

<sup>202</sup> Haring and Douglas, *Economists and the Powerful*.

ideologies, facing off against each other in their own robots: our brains, our bodies. From this meme's eye view, conflict between nations boils down to conflict between ideas housed in bodies; bodies that were born within arbitrary geographical boundaries and were filled with ideas common in their national ecologies of information; bodies that are subject to the power of governments controlling their respective territories; governments themselves are composed of other bodies, with their own sets of ideas that control how they act in their institutional roles; memes about national "interests" and "security" dominate these bodies acting in institutional roles, and what constitutes national interests and security is influenced primarily by the ideas in bodies with the power conferred by wealth – itself merely a set of ideas that form economic institutions like money and property rights. Identity is a bundle of memes about a group a brain considers itself to be a member of, often in a body with physical characteristics that inform other brains to consider it a member of that group; in-group bias, a feature of our physical brains, gives group identities their stickiness and staying power, and lays the groundwork for tribal conflict between groups; and group memberships can overlap within the same brain/body. From the meme's eye view, it is indeed ideas all the way down – down to the level of physical reality: the physical reality of our brains' characteristics that affect which ideas are more likely than others to find a cerebral home, and the physical reality of the real resources that are the contested prize of politics.

#### **viii. Outline of an ideal media system**

According to the liberal view, an ideal media system might look much the same as the status quo in the United States. All are free to start their own media outlet, with

government restrictions on this liberty limited to media like television and radio facing scarcity from the laws of physics. Freedom of the press is guaranteed (to all who own one). Content restrictions exist, but they are minimal in the area of news reportage. Media corporations or individual proprietors compete for audience share, and audiences freely choose from among their products, voting with their dollars and eyeballs. Government-funded media exists, but the majority of its revenues come from private donors, and its audience share is small. The U.S. media system, therefore, is largely a free market for businesses and consumers. From a liberal perspective, this is a system best suited for rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing individuals: competition in the market should produce a plethora of options citizens are free to choose from, and this itself is the best defense against manipulation, deception, and propaganda. In a functioning marketplace, manipulative, deceitful, and propagandistic products should be weeded out, with consumers avoiding them in favor of more honest sources (how they are supposed to do so, without making the assumption of perfect information common in neoclassical economic models, is unclear).<sup>203</sup> The result of this system is that no one can beat the market; that is, no politician, party, corporation, interest group, etc., can evade critical scrutiny from a free market for media companies. There will always be some media outlet to recognize the opportunity to make money by doing good: exposing corruption and criticizing bad policy

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<sup>203</sup> “[I]t is only if actors are blessed with 20/20 vision when it comes to discerning the contours and nuances of the strategic terrain they inhabit that we can be sure that they will neither misperceive their materially given interests nor misidentify or fail to discern the strategies most effective in defending or advancing such interests through ignorance or lack of information. If actors are not quite so blessed, then the whole edifice comes tumbling down as – and precisely to the extent to which – the ideas actors hold acquire (or are seen to acquire) an independence of the context in which they arise. The more ideas mediate material interest, the more indeterminate social and political systems become.” (Hay, 2011, 73)

will be valued by the marketplace, and rewarded. The cost of doing bad for political actors will be made prohibitively expensive.

Yet to believe that this accurately describes the contemporary U.S. media system requires that one simply assumes it does; a look at media systems in other countries, or even a few hours of browsing the internet, quickly reveals just how much less than a plethora of options the U.S. mass media offers (for political news and perspectives). Reporting on foreign policy rarely strays from the perspectives of the U.S. foreign policy elite, and reporting on economic issues rarely strays from mainstream Republican and Democratic Party positions – two very constrained spectrums of opinion, far narrower than what is widely available in several other countries (and on the internet). The liberal view simply does not obtain; the free market for media companies has failed, the felicitous equilibrium that it should produce is nowhere in sight. Instead, we have a thoroughly distorted market: non-consumers receiving benefits they have not paid for, and consumers paying for benefits they do not receive; a funding model for television in which viewers are not the customers, but advertisers, skewing incentives; and political-economic power exercising a clear selection pressure over which ideas make it into the mass media. Instead of fulfilling the role imagined in the liberal ideal, the news media tends toward a free market version of a propaganda system, with a variety of political-economic pressures in place of government diktat.

Perhaps one benefit of Trump's election was that it provided a clear illustration of the dangers inherent in the U.S. media system. Referring to the reality TV star's candidacy in early 2016, the CEO of CBS infamously said: "It may not be good for America, but it's

damn good for CBS.”<sup>204</sup> (Half a century earlier, a former CBS news director made a similar point with the opposite valence: that “[t]elevision makes so much [money] at its worst that it can’t afford to do its best.”)<sup>205</sup> A free market is theorized to allocate resources in the most efficient manner to best meet consumers’ needs; yet this free market for media companies resulted in nearly \$5 billion in free coverage lathered on Trump.<sup>206</sup> In addition to the studies of foreign policy and economic coverage discussed in chapter five, U.S. media coverage of the 2016 election contradicts the liberal view, and confirms the view argued here. Commercial pressures in a commercial media system resulted in an inordinate amount of free coverage to arguably the least qualified presidential candidate in U.S. history. What was bad for the country was good for media companies – and the latter won out. For those who have not been exposed to contrarian perspectives on foreign policy and economics excluded from the U.S. mass media, who may not viscerally understand how their omission vitiates democracy, the case of Donald Trump vividly illustrates the same fundamental deficiency.

The U.S. media system does not produce the beneficial outcomes predicted by the liberal view due partially to supply-side deficiencies; but other of its failures come from the demand side. Our minds are “designed” to accept and build upon information we have already absorbed as schemas; media stories that contradict widely-held beliefs are more likely to be rejected, ignored, or processed in a distorted manner. Some of the most widely-held beliefs are those we are socialized with in schools, which studies of textbooks around the world reveal to be beliefs of national greatness. Those with a stronger psychological

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<sup>204</sup> Eliza Collins, “Les Moonves: Trump’s run is ‘damn good for CBS,’” Politico, February 29, 2016.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in Uscinski, 2014, 110.

<sup>206</sup> Mary Harris, “A Media Post-Mortem on the 2016 Presidential Election,” mediaQuant (November 14, 2016).

predisposition to in-group loyalty, authority, and purity are more likely to reject stories that criticize the national, party, or religious in-group, political and religious leaders, and social taboos. These all feed back into the supply side: media companies are unlikely to turn off viewers and readers by presenting them with stories that challenge their previously held beliefs, causing uncomfortable cognitive dissonance they may try to avoid by switching the channel or cancelling a subscription. Perhaps if human beings more closely approximated the liberal ideal of rational thinkers, the present U.S. media system would work as it should in theory; but we do not. When the truth matches our accumulated knowledge, we desire it – but when it does not, we desire alternative facts.

What then would an ideal media system look like, one that is calibrated to the minds we actually have, and which could provide the free market of ideas required for democracy better than the free market for media companies currently does? As discussed in Chapter 6, Pascual Serrano’s call is where we must start:

We are faced with a new challenge: to find a way for citizens to reclaim our right to information *through* the State, *from* which we need to demand the enforcement of its duty to guarantee it. We, citizens, must give power to the State, and the State, for its part, must give us control. This is the true freedom of the press in a democracy.<sup>207</sup>

To a Unitedstatesian audience, this should bring up concerns about the role of the government: how can the citizenry give power to the state, and receive control in return?

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to conceptualize two evils we seek to avoid: Nicholas Garnham’s “pap and propaganda” – the commercial dreck of the present U.S. media system, and the overt, intentional propaganda present in several media systems

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<sup>207</sup> Serrano, “Democracia,” 82, translation and emphasis mine.

around the world where the state has taken power without granting control – or Phillip Pettit’s *dominium* and *imperium*, un-freedom caused by private or state domination.

Domination is produced when one agent has the power of interference on an arbitrary basis over another: when an agent has “sway over the other, in the old phrase, and the sway is arbitrary.”<sup>208</sup>

Clearly, the media as a collective agent has the power of interference on an arbitrary basis over the citizenry, simply by omitting political perspectives and information citizens would otherwise choose to obtain.<sup>209</sup> This form of private domination is an evil to be avoided, and state domination, *imperium*, is an even clearer evil to be avoided. Pettit notes that “almost all the main figures [in the classical republican tradition] treat the question of which institutions do best by freedom as an open, empirical issue, not as a question capable of a priori resolution.”<sup>210</sup> In the realm of the media as well, the appropriateness of freedom (as governmental noninterference) should be treated as an open, empirical issue. We have no more warrant to consider state domination an evil so great that we must open ourselves

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<sup>208</sup> Pettit, *Republicanism*, 52.

<sup>209</sup> There is one other important feature of domination in Pettit’s account: its collective recognition. If domination is being exerted upon society by the media, should we consider collective recognition of such to be required for this domination to actually exist?

The question as to whether such conditions obtain is going to be salient for nearly everyone involved, since it is of pressing interest for human beings to know how far they fall under the power of others. And the fact that the conditions obtain, if they do obtain, is usually going to be salient for most of the people involved: this, since the kinds of resource in virtue of which one person has power over another tend, with one exception, to be prominent and detectable. ... The exception is the case where one person or group is in a position to exercise backroom manipulation, whether manipulation of the options, manipulation of the expected payoffs, or manipulation of the actual payoffs. (Pettit, 1997, 59-60)

Clearly, the media would be one collective agent eminently capable of “backroom manipulation”: it can manipulate political options by keeping certain views outside of the public sphere while portraying other views as the only available options; it can manipulate expected payoffs by failing to subject some candidates’ platforms to sufficient scrutiny, or misrepresenting other candidates’ platforms; and it can manipulate actual payoffs, by subjecting or threatening to subject elected politicians to a campaign of bad press for pushing legislation (promised to voters during a campaign) contrary to the interests of media companies or their owners.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

entirely to private domination, than we have warrant to consider private domination an evil so great that we must open ourselves entirely to government domination. We can plan ways to avoid both.

Perhaps we should follow the authors of the U.S. Constitution, and tame this source of concentrated power through democratic control and checks and balances: turning the media into a *de jure* branch of government, under direct democratic control. A government body, like the Federal Communications Commission, could be removed from the executive branch, and established as an independent, fourth branch of government: the Democratic Media Commission (DMC). Its goal would be to ensure that the public enjoys a free market of ideas and information to inform its political decisions, without any actor exercising domination through disproportionate sway in the marketplace. It could be governed by a board of commissioners, as the FCC is now, except with a total of nine: five of its commissioners being elected by working journalists and four through direct elections using rank-order voting open to all citizens.

The DMC's remit would include analyzing news reports to check for bias, and levying fines for misleading reports, persistent ideological bias, or lack of ideological diversity. Ensuring great breadth of ideological perspective would be of the utmost importance: if some perspectives were excluded from "popular information and the means of acquiring it," then the goal of a free market of ideas, free of domination by any actor, would not be reached. This fourth branch of government would exercise power (granting the citizenry control) over media outlets reaching above a certain number of people – especially outlets that serve as the sole or primary source of news for a significant portion of the population. For smaller media outlets, with fewer resources to devote to providing a



balance of diverse opinions, governmental interference would have to be different. Since the founding of the United States, a strongly partisan, small-scale press has facilitated a lively political culture, and today it adds to the overall diversity of ideological perspectives. However, it threatens ideological self-segregation and the absorption of biased, inaccurate information that is held unperturbed in an environment walled off from any possible challenge. To avoid this outcome, such media outlets could be required to provide rebuttal space for journalists from opposing sides of the political spectrum. People could still choose to ignore the airtime or column inches devoted to rebuttals, but to ignore would now require an active decision, rather than the passive operation of our psychology.

This proposal would simply add a more stringent layer of regulation over the media, albeit regulation over which the citizenry would have some representative-democratic control. The commercial structure of the media would remain as before. The pressures of advertiser, owner, and source bias previously discussed would still be in operation. In fact, media companies would then be caught between a rock and a hard place: the financial pressures of a competitive marketplace (which are relieved somewhat by being swayed by advertiser and source bias) on the one side, and the financial pressures of a new regulatory scheme using fines to punish non-adherence on the other. This is clearly not what the news media needs, especially at this historical juncture when the current newspaper business model is facing extinction, and no viable replacement is on the horizon. Forcing media companies to take expensive measures (hiring additional journalists to provide a breadth of ideological diversity) by threat of fines will not work when journalism itself is flirting with economic extinction – we cannot squeeze blood from a stone. Such an attempt to

create a free market of ideas then runs into its toughest challenge in the form of the market itself.

However, the current economic weakness of the news media can inform our proposal. Firstly, the news media has since the inception of the republic been subsidized by the government. And early television news was considered an important public service to be provided by the networks, a loss leader that would increase a network's prestige and build brand loyalty. It would represent no reckless leap into unexplored territory to revisit ways of subsidizing the provision of political information. Secondly, the most widely-blamed cause for the present crisis of journalism is the threat posed by the internet to its profit model. And what is the nature of this threat? For one, the internet has reduced the marginal cost of journalistic product to near zero. In other words, once a newspaper article has been written or a news program recorded, producing additional units costs nearly nothing. It costs roughly the same to produce an article read by five people as five million; it costs roughly the same to produce a news program viewed once or one billion times. In fact, journalism has been turned by the internet into an economic activity having all the characteristics of a public good: zero marginal cost, non-rivalry in consumption, and non-excludability.

Since the internet has turned journalism as an economic activity into a public good, it seems we have three options: ban the internet, allow market failure in journalism, or *treat* journalism as a public good. The first option we can dismiss out of hand. The second option would be especially pernicious, since a market failure in journalism may impede even recognition of the very fact of market failure: with only increasingly vapid and sensationalistic journalism available, the public sphere would be lacking any strong voice

to announce the market failure itself. Lastly, treating journalism as a public good (like street lights, national defense, the police, roads and bridges) would mean turning it into a public utility. This may come as an unpleasant proposal for the owners of the news media; but with eminent domain law requiring adequate compensation to be paid for acquired property, only those bullish on the news media's economic future would have cause for great distress. The DMC could be authorized to use eminent domain to buy distressed media companies (primarily newspapers), leaving commercially viable and successful companies alone.

Inspired by James Curran's proposal, the DMC would oversee the entry of several major new players into the media system, in addition to the newly-regulated commercial sector. First, failing newspapers bought by the DMC contain valuable assets: primarily, their journalists and editors. These would be given funding, autonomy, and control, allowing them to choose whether to continue as online-only newspapers or to branch out into other journalistic projects online or on television. Second, organized political groups, from parties to activist organizations, would receive government grants (following the Dutch model) from the DMC to operate their own media outlets. Third, ethnic and political minority groups would also receive grants from the DMC (following the Scandinavian model) to fund their own publications and television programs to air on government-funded or commercial channels. Fourth, the DMC would create an independent television and radio station funded generously by the government, which would hire only experienced journalists from around the world, who would govern the television and radio station themselves, setting editorial policy without interference. (Additionally, all media outlets receiving government funding could be required to hire a certain percentage of

foreign journalists – say, 10-20% – to impede parochial, nationalist bias in reporting.) These four new entrants to the media system would need to have funding guarantees, indexed to inflation, so that neither the DMC nor Congress could use its purse strings to exert control.

Turning a large portion of journalism into a public utility would bring us back to the problem noted above: that of tyranny of the majority, and government *imperium*. What we would need for a well-functioning journalistic public utility is a specifically republican institutional form. We would need safeguards to prevent a tyranny of the majority from exercising domination through a publicly-owned media. The first mechanism is having five commissioners elected by working journalists themselves, with the other four being elected by the citizenry. Yet we would need a contestatory mechanism – in place of direct democratic control – for those whose interests are not being served by the media to remedy their grievances.

A Media Ombudsman's Office (press council) led by a directly-elected official could be instituted as a contestatory mechanism for those who feel the media and the DMC are not tracking their interests. The remit of the Ombudsman would *not* be determining what is "better" or desirable, but instead to ensure maximum diversity, including plenty of views that some will unavoidably consider "worse" and undesirable. What is important here is determining whether a perspective on an issue is in good faith, or whether someone is clamoring for space in the mediatized public sphere merely to propagandize in bad faith in furtherance of their own interests. Like any system, one organized around providing maximum diversity can be gamed: one could define individual perspectives in such a way as to create an unmanageable number of them – or to create an artificially low number.

Drawing inspiration from the Declaration of Independence's "decent respect to the opinions of mankind," this problem can be avoided: political perspectives, philosophies, or worldviews commanding the allegiance of some significant fraction of the world's population – for instance, liberal and conservative variants of capitalist democracy, state or authoritarian capitalism, socialism or communism, social democracy, anarchism or libertarianism, and theocracy or religious authoritarianism – would make the list. Within each of these broad trends of thought, diversity would remain essential: no one strand or sect would be allowed to define the overall trend, but instead each would be represented by proponents who may often disagree on finer points. This design could evade attempts to game the system by, for instance, a group with the goal of enlisting the U.S. to overthrow a foreign government creating half a dozen "competing" perspectives all arguing for military intervention, but with spurious areas of disagreement designed to generate an illusion of diversity and to crowd out or dilute anti-war perspectives. The Ombudsman's Office would be tasked with determining whether an excluded perspective is in good faith and is sufficiently unique and valuable to warrant inclusion.

The DMC would be instituted via constitutional amendment laying out the principles it is tasked with maintaining; if the commissioners and the ombudsman fail to live up to their duty of maintaining a free marketplace of ideas, citizens could bring suit in the courts to compel changes in keeping with the letter and spirit of the constitutional amendment which created it. Citizens would thereby retain their freedom to choose the news that fits their preferences, and to fight for the inclusion of their preferred perspective(s); they would only gain additional freedom in the form of greater options in ideological perspective to choose from and be exposed to.

Objections of all sorts might be made to this proposal, but two seem most likely. First, the expense: the Newspaper Association of America last reported \$37.6 billion in annual revenue, the three top 24-hour cable news channels reported \$4 billion, local TV stations reported \$9.3 billion from news programs (roughly half of their total revenue of \$18.6 billion), and network news programs reported \$1.1 billion (estimated from their reported \$809 million in the first three quarters of 2015).<sup>211</sup> We can use the S&P 500 average price-sales ratio of 2 (historically high) to calculate a rough estimate of fair market value from revenue data: \$104 billion, from combined annual revenues of \$52 billion. Hence even a complete democratization of the core of the U.S. news media system would amount to a one-time expense of \$104 billion, and an annual expense of \$52 billion (or roughly one twelfth of the declared military budget). Second, the issue of social planning: this proposal *is* an instance of social planning, but it is merely replacing one set of managers and directors – the electorate itself, and professional journalists – for another: private investors, media company owners, CEOs, and their undemocratically appointed managers and editors. There is no Edenic ideal threatened with defilement at the hands of an unruly mob; there is a broken, plutocratic system facing a proposal for democratic reform and renewal.

Another objection, along the lines of Markus Prior’s “mo’ media, mo’ problems” research, deserves attention: if the profusion of options ushered in via cable led to many people avoiding politics altogether in favor of entertainment – and even the devolution of news programming into “journo-tainment” could not stop the tide – then in the modern, internet-heavy media environment, would a democratic media system focusing on hard

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<sup>211</sup> Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media 2016.”

news and analysis from a variety of ideological perspectives simply turn off even greater numbers from politics? This is quite possible, but by no means certain: there is also evidence that many are turned off by the news media precisely *because* it has devolved into journo-tainment.<sup>212</sup> Regardless, the tide toward greater political apathy and ignorance can be stemmed by nudging viewers into watching the news, and increasing opportunities for incidental exposure. That is, the commercial entertainment media can be enjoined to set aside a significant fraction of its ad time for advertisements for news programming on DMC-funded channels, and entire commercial breaks can be granted to DMC-funded news shows to present 5-minute summaries of the day's news coverage. In this way, even the most politically apathetic television viewer would be goaded several times a day into tuning into news programming, and would even see short news reports in between breaks in their entertainment programming. This would certainly reduce revenue for television stations and advertisers, but the net result for society – just from a reduction in advertising, not including the increase in levels of political knowledge – may likely be positive.<sup>213</sup> These reforms have dealt with the supply side of the equation; but an ideal media system would also have to address the demand side. Among the many ways our psychology departs from the rational ideal, some seem more correctable by changes in media presentations than others. Among the features of our psychology least likely to be corrected, persuasion and processing through the peripheral route (System 1) stands out. Television is a tool that can only do so much, and ensuring our full and undivided attention during all news programs is not one of its capabilities. Making news programs visually

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<sup>212</sup> E.g., Clarke, *Journalism and Political*, 179, 215, 227, 266.

<sup>213</sup> See, e.g., Hannah Holleman, Inger L. Stole, John Bellamy Foster, and Robert W. McChesney, "The Sales Effort and Monopoly Capital," *Monthly Review* 60, no. 11 (April, 2009); Ron Roberts, *Psychology and Capitalism: The Manipulation of Mind* (Washington: Zero Books, 2015): 71-81.

bland (Sovietizing rather than Foxifying) may be more likely to stimulate central, effortful processing, but may also stimulate channel-switching. However, one negative aspect of peripheral processing can inspire a best practice: if our System 1 is more likely to accept as true a statement from an attractive person, perhaps television pundits should not be selected for their looks.

The rational ideal has it that on moral questions, we deliberate on reasons and then come to judgment. This not being the case, what can media outlets do to stimulate conscious, critical reflection on our gut-instinct moral responses? One possibility is that when making arguments for a political position that implicates morality, journalists should try to paint with all five colors of the moral palette. That is, to invoke care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity when presenting the case for any political argument, even if it associated with Left. (This strategy has received experimental support in application to environmental issues.)<sup>214</sup> Debate moderators and talk show hosts can remind the audience from the beginning that the discussion is likely to engage their gut moral instincts, and urge them to critically interrogate their own reactions. At the end of the program, viewers could be given examples of how moral gut reactions were found over the course of the debate to be inadequate, and where they would need to be thought through (e.g., as in the incest taboo experiment, where common objections were shot down one after another by the experimenter, revealing the irrationality the anti-incest position relied upon).

Due to the phenomenon of attitude inoculation, media outlets cannot provide balance to a story by giving the majority of the focus to one perspective (for instance, the

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<sup>214</sup> Christopher Wolsko, Hector Ariceaga, and Jesse Seiden, "Red, White, and Blue Enough to Be Green: Effects of Moral Framing on Climate Change Attitudes and Conservation Behaviors," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 65 (2016).



President's), and a small amount to critics. Instead of weak balance being better than nothing, it may actually be worse. Media outlets need to be aware of this psychological feature, and ensure that good-faith, well-supported arguments are given equal focus; even, or especially, when one side of an argument enjoys prestige and newsworthiness, and the other side does not.

A more serious psychological maladaptation (in the modern era) is our groupishness, our in-group and out-group biases. It is the bloody thread connecting wars, religious violence, ethnic conflict, and criminal gangs together, yet it also provides the psychological basis for solidarity and cooperation. The media can shape its presentations in an attempt to mute our groupishness, and readapt it to a globalized, interconnected world of mass societies. First, we know that our groupishness manifests itself in our language, with the linguistic intergroup bias – and that this linguistic bias can spur in-group bias in our thinking about what we are reading or listening to. Journalists must then be educated about the linguistic intergroup bias, and learn to avoid it in their writing. Editorial writers and pundits especially should avoid “us” and “them” language, and all journalists should refer to in-groups in the third person. News articles and television scripts should use specific language when describing the actions of governments; the “United States” has never bombed anyone, but the United States Air Force has. When describing in-groups, journalists should take pains to include negative information (which may be easier to do when 10-20% of one's co-workers are foreign nationals, and likely members of different ethnic and religious groups). When describing out-groups, journalists should emphasize both points of similarity with the audience's in-group(s) and out-groups' internal diversity: Muslims follow a great variety of interpretations of their faith, as do Christians and

Buddhists; Iraqis had many different perspectives on their own government as well as the United States'; Russians run the gamut from authoritarian to liberal, and so on. Crime reports should avoid groupishness-piquing adjectives whenever possible: what benefit is there from describing an accused murderer as a *Black* man, a rape victim as a *White* woman, or a drug trafficker as *Hispanic* (except in a local news report on a dangerous criminal at large)? Lastly, whenever possible the media should emphasize, in an attempt to construct, the superordinate in-group of *humanity*, making arbitrary national and ethnic boundaries subordinate and less salient.

Presenting negative information about audiences' in-group(s) is likely to arouse cognitive dissonance, along with any information that challenges widely-held beliefs – prompting motivated, meaning-maintaining, *irrational* reasoning to reduce it. To encourage more rational responses, the news media can first affirm the audience's self-image before presenting negative information about an in-group. For instance, before a report on evidence of torture in U.S Army prisons, audiences could be reminded of U.S. government diplomatic support for political prisoners in some countries, or the U.S. government role in forging the Geneva Conventions; a report on the pedophilia scandal in the Catholic Church could follow a reminder of the good work that Catholic Charities does around the world, and so on. To provide knowledge constraints on motivated reasoning about domestic and international politics, schools would be better positioned than the news media. Parents who feel uncomfortable cognitive dissonance from textbooks that describe domestic and foreign evils perpetrated by their own government should have no power to reject textbooks on the basis of their negative affect. With a fuller and fairer picture of the negative aspects of their country's history, citizens would be socialized with knowledge

constraints that can impede motivating reasoning about current events, particularly those in which their own government acts in ways that contradict widely-held values (like self-determination in the case of coups and electoral interference, and human rights in the case of U.S. government-supported dictatorships, etc.). Media audiences could even be directly encouraged by news anchors, pundits, and editorial writers to imagine the opposite of what they believe, as a way to avoid psychological bias the news may exacerbate. Here, journalists themselves would need to popularize knowledge about psychological biases that affect our thinking about politics, in the hope that knowledge of them may prompt critical reflection that reduces the effects of bias.

System justification tendency is another politically significant bias that the news media should attempt to mute or reduce. Criticisms of existing systems – of political and economic organization, criminal justice, wealth distribution, racial disparities, international relations, etc. – need to be given a great deal of sustained coverage and analysis. Otherwise, *ceteris paribus*, they will be ignored by a human psychology which finds acknowledging them painful. Before such critiques, to minimize cognitive dissonance and prevent irrational strategies to reduce it, media audiences can be reminded that injustice has been a constant of human history; certainly today, some of the grosser injustices like feudal despotism and plantation slavery have been overcome, but every generation has the opportunity to bring society closer and closer to justice. Positive aspects of existing systems can also be emphasized, and proposed fixes for their negative aspects discussed (including whichever small actions individual viewers and readers can take), to ensure that problems seem surmountable.

In covering war and threats of war, the media must heighten its sensitivity to psychological bias. First, the media must thoroughly avoid distortions arising from intergroup bias. Media audiences must hear from a wide range of voices in “enemy” nations or groups: those supportive of their government and those opposed, along with a sampling of the variety of ideological perspectives in the population (e.g., Christian Iraqis who were opposed to Hussein, but feared that a U.S. military invasion would be even worse). Whenever possible, points of commonality between portions of the “enemy” out-group and the audience’s in-group(s) should be emphasized. Above all, war must never be sanitized; psychological discomfort at the sight of a mangled body is an inestimably lesser evil than the violence that turned a human being into a mangled body. Both before and during a war, audiences must be reminded that war inevitably means death, disfigurement, rape, torment, and destruction affecting innocents along with combatants, no matter how smart the bombs used. Lastly, audiences should be constantly reminded of relevant history – the Gulf of Tonkin and Iraqi WMD – whenever a case for war is being made in response to an alleged act of aggression, existential threat, or atrocity.

Lastly, an ideal media system would work hand in glove with the education system to stimulate the development of a more complex, systematic style of thought among viewers and readers, to create the citizens democracy requires. Currently, little is known about what factors tend to facilitate the development of systematic thought; however, in the media context, we could do worse than to apply Goethe’s hypothesis, that “when we treat man as he is, we make him worse than he is; when we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be.” Instead of catering to the lowest common denominator, the media should present complex political issues in their

actual complexity, while attempting to break them down into more easily comprehensible parts. Pundits and editorial writers should provide models of systematic thought, while making their best efforts to *present* systematic arguments in an easily digestible manner. This may frustrate those who have developed only a linear or sequential style of thought, but over time it may help spur additional development. Overall, the media is likely to be able to play only a supporting role in facilitating a systematic thinking style among the population; the heavy lifting must probably be done by schools, parents, and workplaces. Nonetheless, if a supporting role can be played, it should.

#### **ix. Final remarks**

*"It does not take the ghost of a Marie Antoinette to realize that when the few declare war on the many, the millinery business is headed for bad times."*

- Gore Vidal, "Clinton-Gore II"

*"The one question is – How shall this problem be solved? There are two possible methods and only two. One is by the use of bombs; the other is by the use of brains. One is by dynamite; the other is by debate."*

- Edward J. Ward, *The Social Center*

Sandra Braman is correct in pointing out that the power of information dominates all other forms of power. Information provides the backbone for all of power's other forms:

instrumental, structural, and symbolic. Part of information's power lies in ignorance: what we are ignorant of cannot possibly *inform* our decisions. The absence of information influences our decisions in different ways, but no less than the *presence* of information. Hence the awesome power of the media: it can provide information for informed decisions, the backbone of democratic power – or it can withhold it.<sup>215</sup> Facts, theories, proposals, and perspectives lack wings. Although our minds have an impressive ability to combine and create ideas, this ability cannot make up for a lack of specific information about the world. Without an informed understanding of the political realm, no amount of creativity can serve as a replacement.

Deaths totaling *several* 9/11s occur every single day around the world due to a lack of food, billions endure the constant suffocation of poverty, the organized mass murder of war rages on globally, and every second we remain just a computer glitch or human error away from nuclear apocalypse. These problems stand no chance of being solved if the means of mass communication are used to deliver information not about them, but about circuses. (Bread sold separately.)

Our species has been astoundingly successful in spreading from a corner of Africa to conquering the planet. 252 million years ago, another species enjoyed similar success: *Methanosarcina*, a microbe that evolved a way to convert oceanic carbon into energy, converting it into methane.<sup>216</sup> So successful was this microbe that over the next few million years, its methane waste had exterminated 96% of species in the ocean and 70% of

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<sup>215</sup> Stephen Lukes asks: "Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?" (quoted in Schlosberg, 2017, 3)

<sup>216</sup> Morris, *Foragers, Farmers*, 261-262.

vertebrates on land. *Homo sapiens* is currently on pace to match this record; if our carbon emissions continue unabated and a climate tipping point is reached, we could even break it. Liberal democratic societies, as they have from their beginning, can “be fairly described as an organized assault on nature.”<sup>217</sup> And in this war, we are “winning.” I can imagine intelligent, *informed* life elsewhere in the galaxy, constrained by something like *Star Trek’s* Prime Directive of non-interference, observing our planet from afar. Perhaps we are on a reality TV show, *Quasi-Intelligent Species of the Galaxy*, with alien bookies taking bets on our survival over ten years, 20, 50, 100. Being an Earthian, I would be prevented from placing a bet – but I do wonder about the odds.

Since information is the foundation of all forms of power, without *popular* information, and the means of attaining it cheaply and easily, we are guaranteed a tragic farce of a society. Like everyone else, I am prey to informational biases of demand and supply; my beliefs are the result of gene-environment development interacting with the ecology of information I have inhabited. Like everyone else, I am radically ignorant: what I know is only an infinitesimal fraction of what I do *not* know, and my *unknown unknowns* are just as numerous as anyone else’s. Among the little that I do know are spooks about grave threats to the species (itself a spook), along with spook solutions to these problems. I believe my own ideas are accurate descriptions of the world and what could be done to improve it – but so too are everyone’s. My truths are false on the other side of the mountain (living in the United States, I would not need to go further than my front door to cross the true-false border). As a Marine Corps’ sergeant instructor once yelled at me, “excuses are like assholes: we all got ‘em, and they all stink!” We all have memes, and since many of

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<sup>217</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 283.

them contradict each other, they cannot all be true. Yet our radical ignorance prevents us from correctly separating the true from the false. No *one* of us can.

One conception of political science is the study of how to make men good: “soulcraft.”<sup>218</sup> I am incapable of soulcraft, and so too is each one of us. To Montaigne’s question about truth, Plato might have replied that it was specious: that when people have different “truths,” this only reflects their different knowledge.<sup>219</sup> Of course it does. No *one* is capable of soulcraft, just as no *one* can be sure that they have *the* truth, since *everyone’s* knowledge is inevitably incomplete. To be crafted well, souls must craft themselves. I do not believe in miracles, including the “miracle of aggregation” – but there is sufficient evidence to provide a foundation for the hope that the aggregate of political opinions can produce more good results than bad, *when* it is formed in a healthy ecology of information, a free, diverse marketplace of ideas. This would be democracy.

A Native American story has it that:

A young child was greatly frightened by her dream, in which two wolves fought viciously, growling and snapping their jaws. Hoping for solace, she described this dream to her grandfather, a wise and highly respected elder. The grandfather explained that her dream was indeed true: “There are two wolves within each of us, one of them benevolent and peace-loving, the other malevolent and violent. They fight constantly for our souls.” ... At this, the child found herself more frightened

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 79-80.



than ever, and asked her grandfather which one wins. He replied, “The one you feed.”<sup>220</sup>

For a folktale, this is a fairly accurate depiction of the Janus-faced, competitive and cooperative nature evolution has produced; and, of our capacity for both good and evil.

But for soulcraft, things are not so easy. Since none of us can determine the truth, we cannot know what food to feed which wolf. I see no other option than to follow Judge Learned Hand, and presuppose “that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative process. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all.” Is it “too easy a theodicy for truth” to expect that right conclusions *will* be gathered out of a multitude of tongues? Almost certainly. But are they *more likely* to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than a restricted set? Almost certainly; at least until we devise a foolproof way to separate true from false. The choice is not between a proven failure and a guaranteed success; it is a choice between a proven failure and an alternative with no guarantee of success. I would stake upon it my all.

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<sup>220</sup> David P. Barash, “Evolution and Peace: A Janus Connection,” in *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views*, ed. Douglas P. Fry, 25-37 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 37.

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